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CHRISTMAS

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THIRD EDITION

HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS

Season's greetings! If you've always wanted to know more about Christmas and its wealth of traditions, these pages are packed with intriguing info and festive folklore. From the secret history of Santa to the names of the Three Wise Men, from mistletoe to Mary, explore the history of Christmas.

FUTURE

HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS

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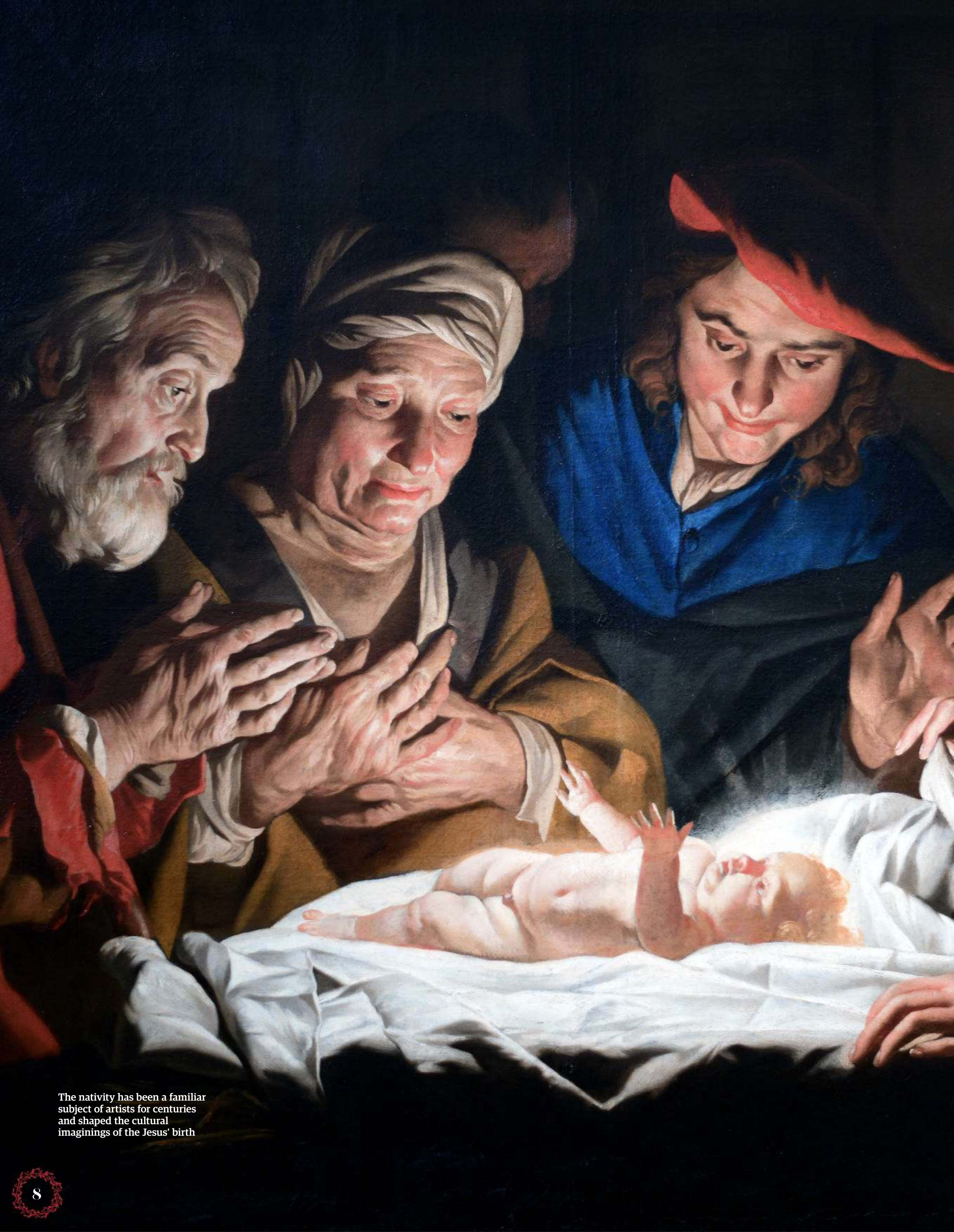
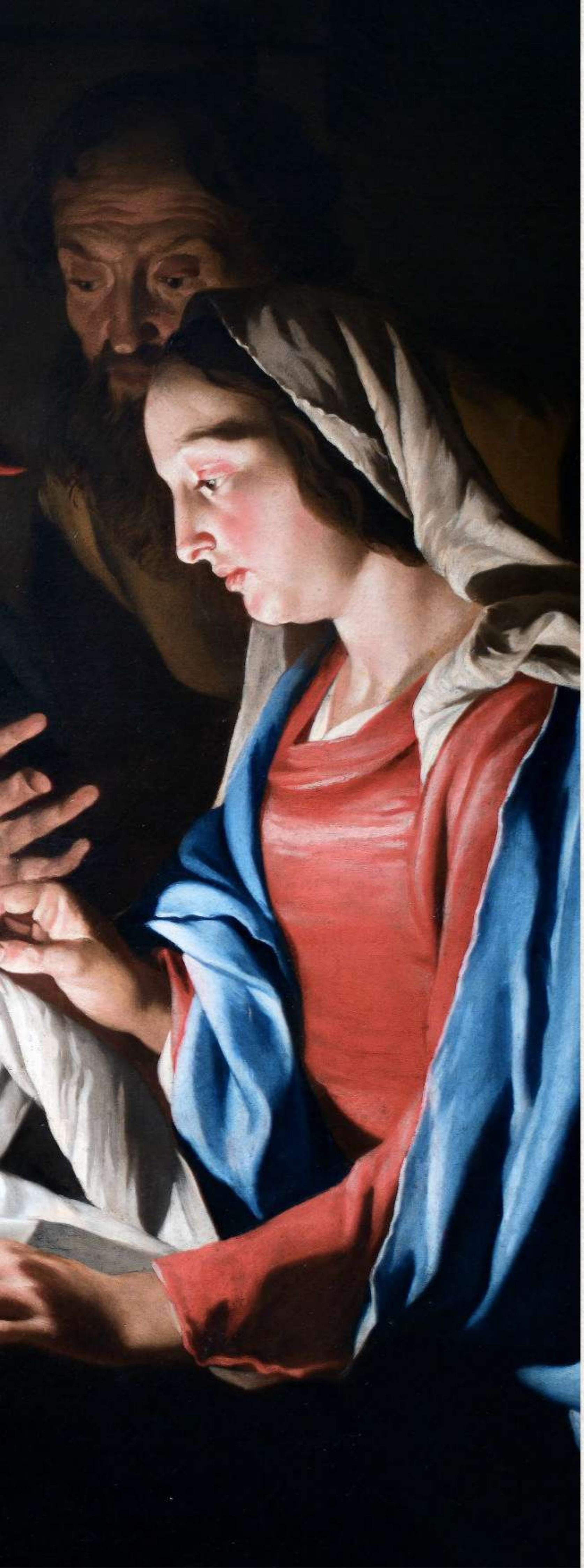


The nativity has been a familiar subject of artists for centuries and shaped the cultural imaginings of the Jesus' birth



The Story of the Nativity

The birth of Jesus is one of the best known stories in the world, but what does the Bible really say about it?

Written by Ben Gazur

The life of Jesus has been called the Greatest Story Ever Told, and every great story needs a good beginning. The nativity, or birth, of Jesus is one of the best known aspects of his life. Each year at Christmas the tale is retold in countless homes, churches, and TV screens across the world.

To get the whole story of the nativity, however, you have to examine our best sources, the four canonical gospels, and piece it together. Each gospel was written to emphasise different aspects of the life of Jesus and each includes details about the birth of Jesus that may not be reflected in the others. The Gospel of Mark, considered the first to be written of the four, gives no narrative of the birth of Jesus at all. The Gospel of John does not discuss Jesus' earthly birth but rather his genesis as the 'word of God' in the beginning of time. It is from Luke and Matthew that we must draw out the story. So what is actually said to have happened during the nativity?

The Annunciation

It was during the reign of Herod the Great (37-1 BCE) in the Roman province of Judea that a girl called Mary became pregnant. Mary was pledged to be married to a man called Joseph but the two had not yet consummated their relationship. This was a troubling turn of events for those involved.

In the Gospel of Luke, the angel Gabriel came to Mary and revealed that she was pregnant with a son that she should call Jesus. Mary was perturbed because she was a virgin, and asked how she could have conceived. The angel revealed that the Holy Spirit had visited her, and that the child she would bear would be the son of God.

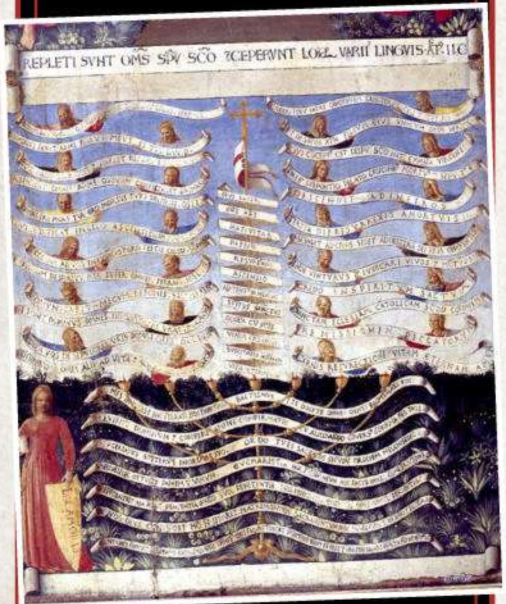
Genealogy of Jesus

"This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham…" Thus begins the Gospel of Matthew. The writer then gives the male line genealogy of Jesus, via 40 generations back to Abraham. The line of descent as listed in Matthew misses out several generations that are mentioned in the Old Testament.

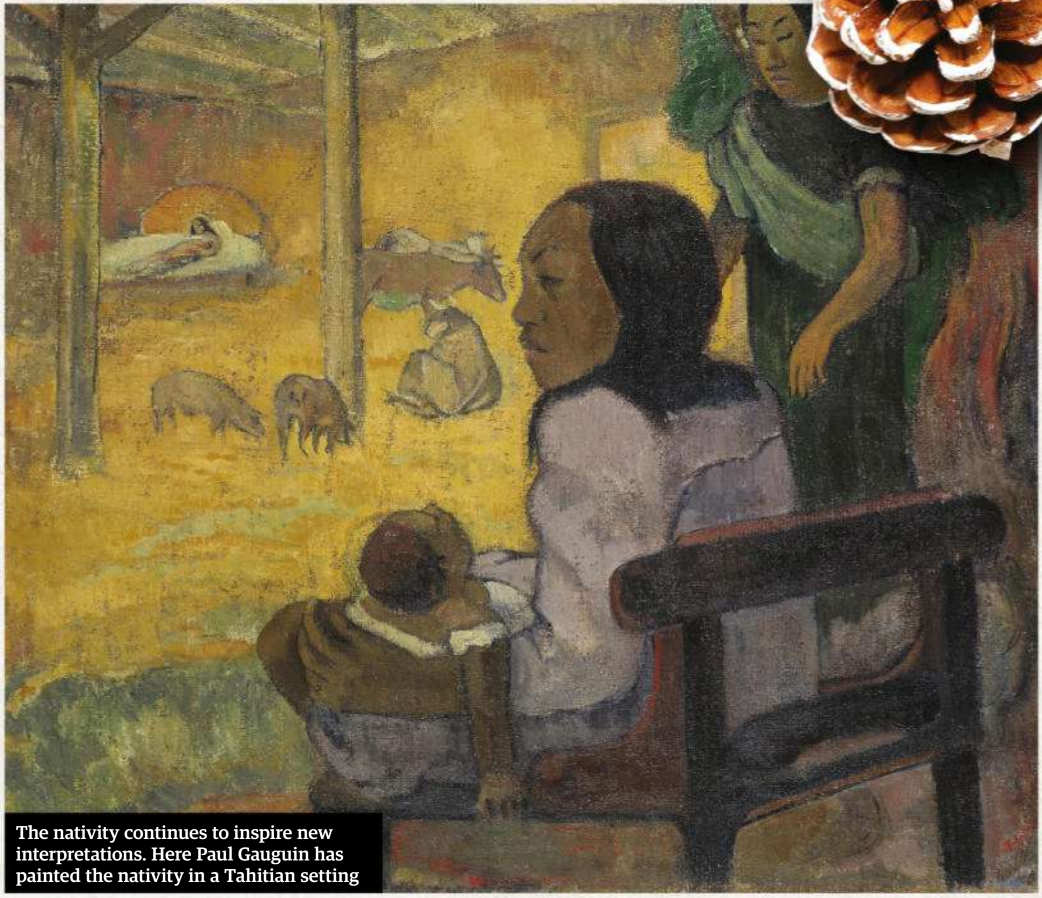
In the Gospel of Luke a genealogy is given that traces Jesus' descent all the way from Adam. The two sets of ancestors given in the gospels are strongly divergent and disagree in many places. Was Joseph's father Jacob, or Heli? In Matthew's telling Jesus is descended from Solomon, son of David, while Luke suggests it was via David's other son Nathan. Various attempts have been made to reconcile these differences but why were the genealogies felt to be so important?

Several passages in the Old Testament include prophecies that the Messiah will come from the house of David, an Old Testament king. By showing Jesus as a direct descendant of David, several statements about the Messiah are shown to be fulfilled. By linking him to Adam, the first man, the Gospel of Luke makes Jesus a culmination of all humanity.

Both Matthew and Luke point out that Joseph was not the father of Jesus, who was the son of God. This rather begs the question of whether Jesus really was then descended from David in the ways they demonstrate.



The genealogy of Jesus appears in two of the gospels and has been used to decorate churches and bibles for centuries



The nativity continues to inspire new interpretations. Here Paul Gauguin has painted the nativity in a Tahitian setting

The Gospel of Matthew does not mention an angelic visitation to Mary, but Joseph does receive one. When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant his first thought was to divorce her as Jewish law demanded, but to do so discreetly to save her from public shame. Before he could do so however, an angel appeared in a dream and announced that the child Mary was carrying was a son given to her by the Holy Spirit. When Joseph awoke he followed the orders of the angel and married her despite already being pregnant.

Mary was not the only member of her family to have become surprisingly pregnant at this time. All the gospels mention John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus. He was born to a cousin of Mary's called Elizabeth, who was elderly. When an angel announced the miraculous pregnancy of Elizabeth to her husband Zechariah, the old man was unconvinced and doubted it would come to pass. For his disbelief, Zechariah was unable to speak until his son John was born.

While Elizabeth was pregnant with John the Baptist, Mary came to visit. As soon as Mary entered the house Elizabeth's child began to leap in her womb and Elizabeth announced that Mary was to be mother of the Messiah.

The Roman census

The Gospel of Luke gives the fullest account of what happened next in the story of the nativity. "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed." This decree from the Emperor caused a great upheaval within the Roman Empire.

Luke specifically says that this census took place under the governorship of Quirinius. Publius Sulpicius Quirinius was placed in charge of the province of Syria and the expansion of direct Roman authority into Judea. This took place in 6 CE. From the Jewish historian Josephus we have confirmation that a census did take place under Quirinius. Unfortunately the timing of this census does not fit with the Gospel of Matthew, which says Herod the Great was still on the throne of Judea when Jesus was born. As Herod died in 4 BCE it is impossible for both of these narratives to be completely accurate.

We also know that there were never censuses taken of the entire empire. A census was a local affair. The census of Quirinius would only have covered Judea. As Joseph and Mary were living in Galilee, not a part of Judea, they would not have been involved. Many biblical scholars believe that Luke erred in making the census the reason Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem. For the purposes of his story, however, this journey was vital to place Jesus' birth in that town.

Instead of taxing people where they were living at the moment of the census decree, it was decided that all people must return to the place of their ancestors. As Joseph was descended from King David, and David's home town was Bethlehem, he and Mary were forced to leave Nazareth in Galilee and journey there to be enrolled on the taxation lists. Mary at this point was heavily pregnant. None of the gospels mention her making the journey on a little donkey.

It was while in Bethlehem that Mary gave birth to her son, Jesus. Luke's telling of the story involves Jesus being placed in a manger, a trough used for feeding animals. This makeshift cradle was used because Joseph and Mary had not been able to find room at an inn where she might give birth.

The presence of a manger at the birth site has led to many visual representations of Jesus being born in a stable. Often farm animals are shown surrounding the Holy Family and sometimes kneeling before the Messiah. None of the gospels mention this. Early church tradition had Jesus being born in a cave. A 2nd century writer called Justin Martyr says "When the child was born in Bethlehem, since Joseph could not find a lodging in that village, he took up his quarters in a certain cave near the village; and while they were there Mary brought forth the Christ and placed him in a manger." The non-canonical gospel known as the Protoevangelium of James, also written in the 2nd century, also describes Mary giving birth in a cave, not in the inn stable of the popular imagination.

Today if you visit the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the actual spot where Jesus is supposed to have been born is in a crypt below a church, formed from a natural grotto. The first church on the site was build by Helena, mother of the Roman emperor Constantine, in 326 CE. A century earlier the church father Origen had described how the very manger Jesus slept in could still be seen there.

"With respect to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, if anyone desires to have additional evidence, there is shown in Bethlehem the cave where he was born, and the manger in the cave where he was wrapped in swaddling clothes. And this sight is greatly talked of in surrounding places, even among the enemies of the faith. It is being said that in this cave was born that Jesus who is worshipped by Christians."

Caves were often used for the stabling of animals at this time in the region. It may well be accurate that Jesus was surrounded by farm animals as he came into the world.

The various nativity stories incorporate ancient Jewish prophecies about a promised saviour of Israel

While shepherds watched

In the countryside around Bethlehem, shepherds were guarding their flocks through the night. An angel appeared before them in heavenly glory and bid them "Be not afraid." The angel announced the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem. The shepherds were told to go there and find a child swaddled and placed in a manger. As the angel departed, more of the heavenly host appeared and sang of the glory of God.

The shepherds hurried to follow the guidance of the angel and went at once to Bethlehem. There they found Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus in his manger. The shepherds told everyone they met of the angel's message. All who heard them were amazed. Mary took in all they said and marvelled at it. The shepherds left and repeated the words of the angel and all they had seen, glorifying God.

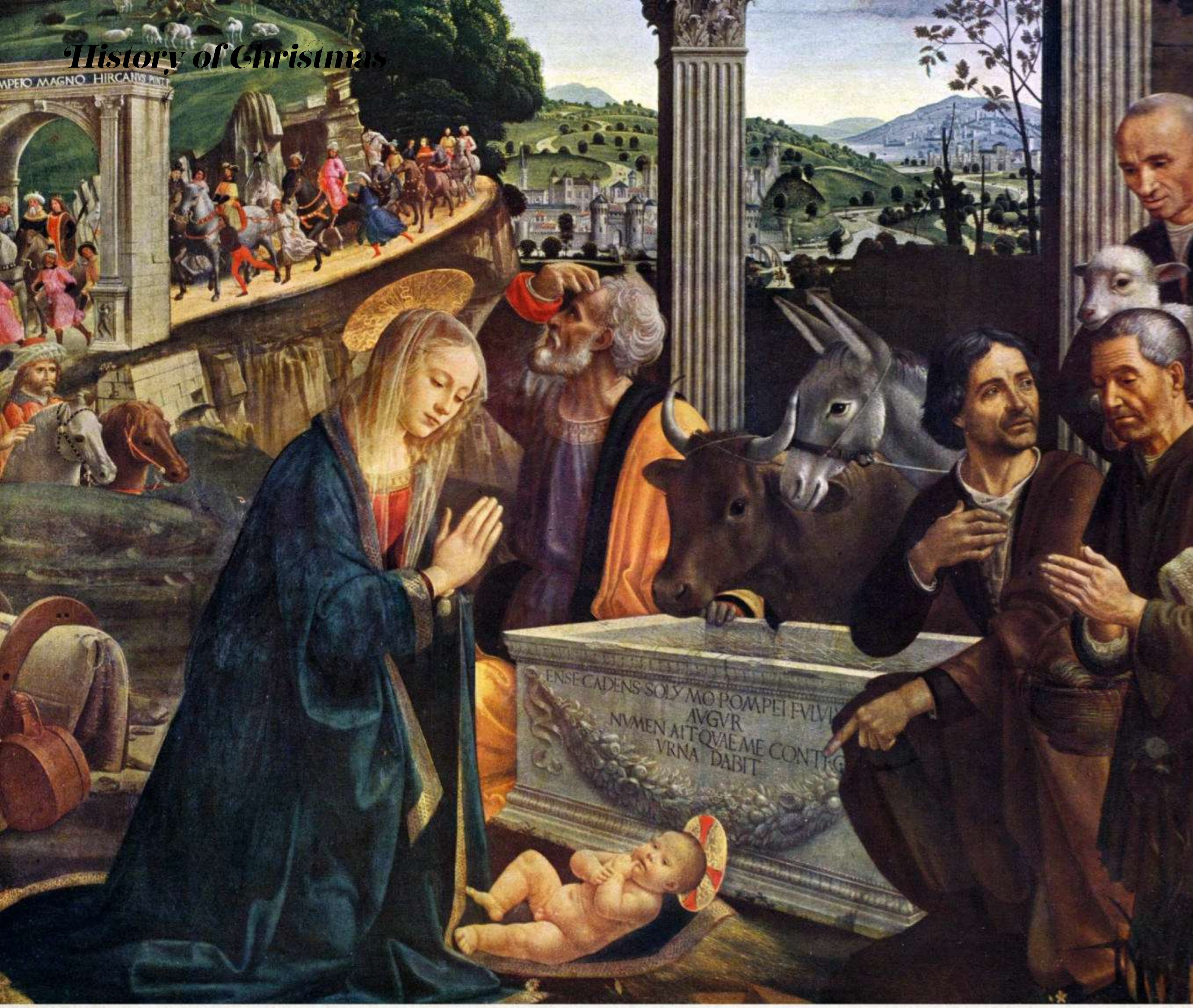
The coming of the Magi

King Herod the Great was a suspicious man and always on the lookout for dangers to his throne. Herod ruled Judea but was a client king of the Romans. He had the support of the Romans but was expected to support them in turn. His crown was always at risk of being taken away and given to someone more compliant with the empire's needs. He had backed Mark Antony in the Roman civil wars but when Octavian (Augustus Caesar) was triumphant he was allowed to keep his throne. His paranoia only deepened, however. In the pursuit of power Herod had executed one of his wives and put three of his sons to death.

Herod ordered the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem that had been destroyed centuries earlier. This costly undertaking was perhaps done to increase his support among the Jewish people he ruled. Herod also ordered a temple be built and dedicated to the emperor Augustus. His religiosity seems to have been always in service to the stability of his throne.

According to the Gospel of Matthew, travellers from the east arrived in Jerusalem. These Magi, or wise men, asked where they might find the newly

Images of scenes from the nativity story appear early in Christian art, as here from a 4th century Roman sarcophagus



MPEIO MAGNO HIRCANVS PONT
ENSE CADENS SOLYMO POMPEI FVLVI
AVGVR
NVMEN AIT QVAE ME CONTEG
VRNA DABIT

born king of the Jews. They had observed a star in the heavens and followed it to locate the child. When Herod heard of this he called all the chief people of the city together and questioned them closely. Where was the Messiah to be born? In Bethlehem, he was told. That at least was where scripture prophesied.

Herod had the Magi secretly brought to him, for he did not want to give credence to their claims. He made them describe the star they were following and when it had first appeared. With seemingly benign interest he directed the Magi towards Bethlehem and told them "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

The Magi continued to follow the star until it stopped over the place where Jesus was to be found. At this point we are told Jesus was in a house, which they entered. As soon as they saw the child they bowed down in adoration. As well as their worship they offered expensive gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

On leaving Jesus and Mary, the Magi were given a warning in a dream. They were told not to return to Jerusalem, nor to tell Herod what they had discovered. Departing and travelling by circuitous roads, they avoided Jerusalem and escaped back into the East.

The Massacre of the Innocents

Herod the Great had not forgotten about the birth of a rival to his crown, however.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that the newborn baby was circumcised on the eighth day after his birth, as was traditional for Jewish boys. He also received the name Jesus that the angel had foretold. Luke then says that Jesus was presented at the Temple after the period of purification had taken place. According to the laws of Moses a woman who has given birth is ritually impure. She is forbidden from entering holy places or touching anything used in ritual. Mary offered a sacrifice of a pair of turtledoves, or a pair of young pigeons, to expiate her sins.

At the temple Jesus is seen by a holy man called Simeon. The Holy Spirit had previously revealed that Simeon would not die before he had seen the Messiah. As soon as he saw Jesus he praised God and said that he could now die happy having met the Lord.

The Holy Family was also seen by a prophetess called Anna. This Anna was a devout woman aged 84 who spent all her time, day and night, in the Temple offering up prayers for the salvation of Israel. On seeing the infant Jesus she gave thanks to God for his coming and told all who she met about the baby.

The Gospel of Luke ends the tale of the nativity there and says only that the Holy Family returned to Nazareth. Jesus grew up healthy and strong there and was filled with the favour of God. The Gospel of Matthew, however, tells a more sinister story.

As soon as the Magi (who are not mentioned by Luke) departed, Joseph received a vision of an angel in a dream. This angel commanded Joseph to rise at once. "Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." Joseph heeded the call, got up in the night, and bundled his family onto the road.

Herod was apoplectic with rage that the Magi had not returned to him with intelligence about the birth of a new king of the Jews. Because he could not learn where exactly this child was in Bethlehem from them, he ordered the slaughter of all male children in the town who were aged under two years old, to be certain Jesus was killed. The children who died in this barbaric act are known as the Holy Innocents.

Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fled from Judea into Egypt. Only when Joseph heard of the death of King Herod did he allow the Holy Family to leave Egypt. The Gospel of Matthew says that this journey fulfills a prophecy in the Book of Hosea that says "Out of Egypt I called my son."

Because Joseph heard that Herod's son Archelaus was now ruling in Judea he felt it would be too dangerous to return there. Instead he moved his family to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, which fulfilled a prophesy that the Messiah would be called Nazarene. This of course differs from the story in the Gospel of Luke that says Joseph already lived in Nazareth before travelling to Bethlehem.

Envisioning the nativity

The birth of Jesus is one of the most important moments in Christian theology. It was the moment when God was made flesh. The birth of Jesus also allowed for the crucifixion, which Christians believe allowed the sins of humanity to be forgiven. It is not surprising then that a lot of thought has been given to this miraculous moment.

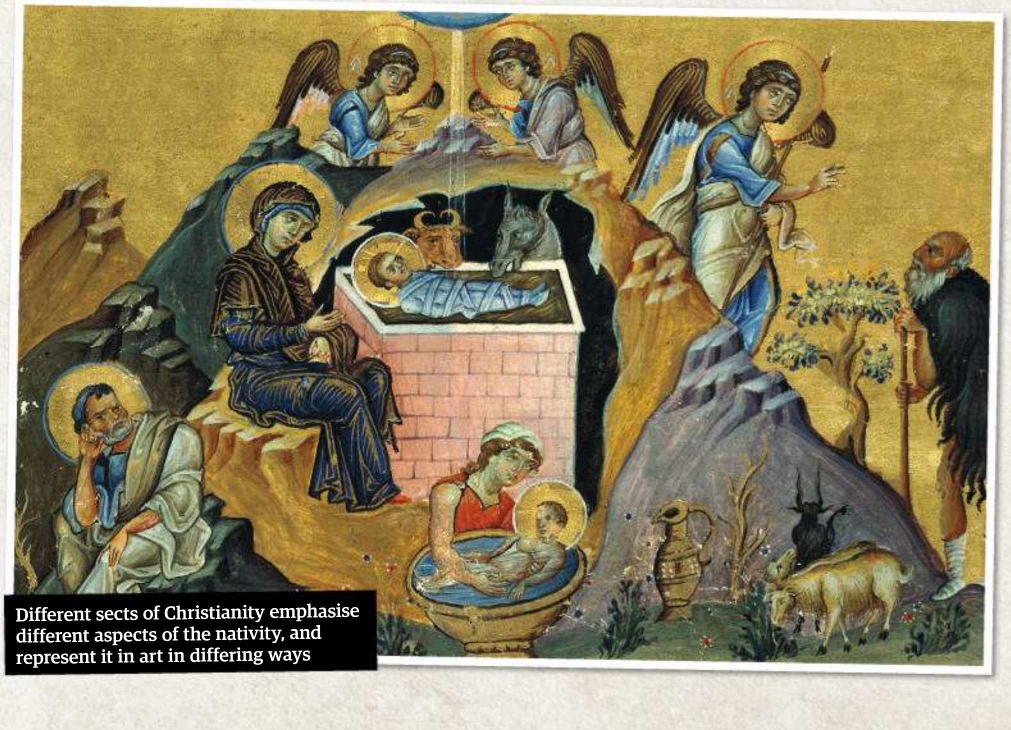
The efforts to reconcile the different stories of the nativity found in Matthew and Luke's gospels, though not always successful, have given us the culturally accepted tale as we know it today. Each of the stages of the nativity have become resonant with meaning and emphasise differing aspects.

Many artistic representations of the birth of Jesus dwell on the humble nature of his birth. Mary, who was carrying the son of God, who was also God himself, is shown riding a donkey on the journey to Bethlehem to underline the quotidian aspects of Jesus' arrival. His entry into the world was not accompanied by pomp and ceremony. His birth did not differ from those of millions of other people. Yet artists may also choose to show the supernatural aspects of the nativity. Angels, halos, and God's light often appear in nativity images.

The story of the nativity can encompass both of these readings and many more. Comic tellings of the nativity have existed since the Middle Ages. *The Second Shepherd's Play* from Wakefield features shepherds visiting a child in a manger and offering gifts to it - only to find the baby is a stolen lamb that has been swaddled.

"Give me leave him to kiss, and lift up the clout.
What the devil is this? He has a long snout."

The tension between the sacred and the absurd in the nativity remains today. Any number of films retell the nativity as it is shown in the Bible, but you can also find satires in films like Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*. That both exist at the same time shows how relevant the story of the nativity remains today.


Different sects of Christianity emphasise different aspects of the nativity, and represent it in art in differing ways

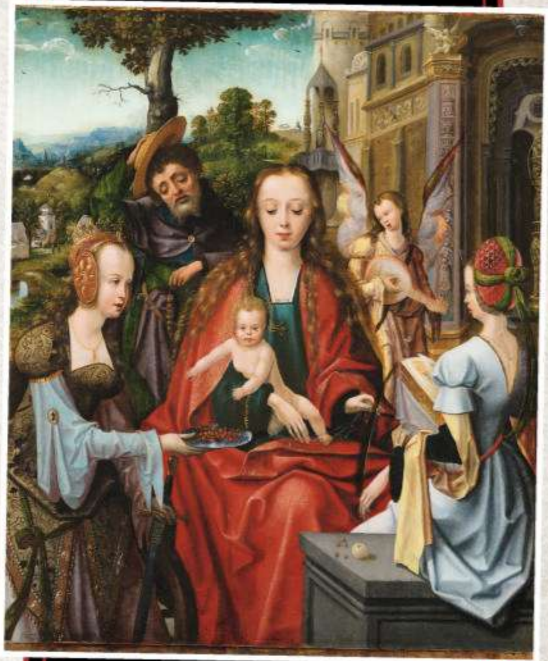
Why Bethlehem?

Jesus is so closely associated with the town of Nazareth that in many ancient sources he is simply called the Nazarene. His parents Mary and Joseph both lived in Nazareth according to Luke, so how did Jesus come to be born around 70 miles away in Bethlehem? The answer lies in biblical prophesy.

The Old Testament records the sayings of the prophet Micah who lived in the 8th century BCE. In one of his statements Micah declared that:

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times."

This has been taken to be a prophecy stating that the Messiah would be born in the town of Bethlehem. The belief that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem is mentioned in the Gospel of John when people question how Jesus can be the Messiah when he comes from Nazareth and not Bethlehem, not knowing he was born there. Bethlehem was also the place where King David was born so further links Jesus to the line of kings.


The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem was the fulfilment of a prophecy recorded in the Old Testament that the Messiah would come from there

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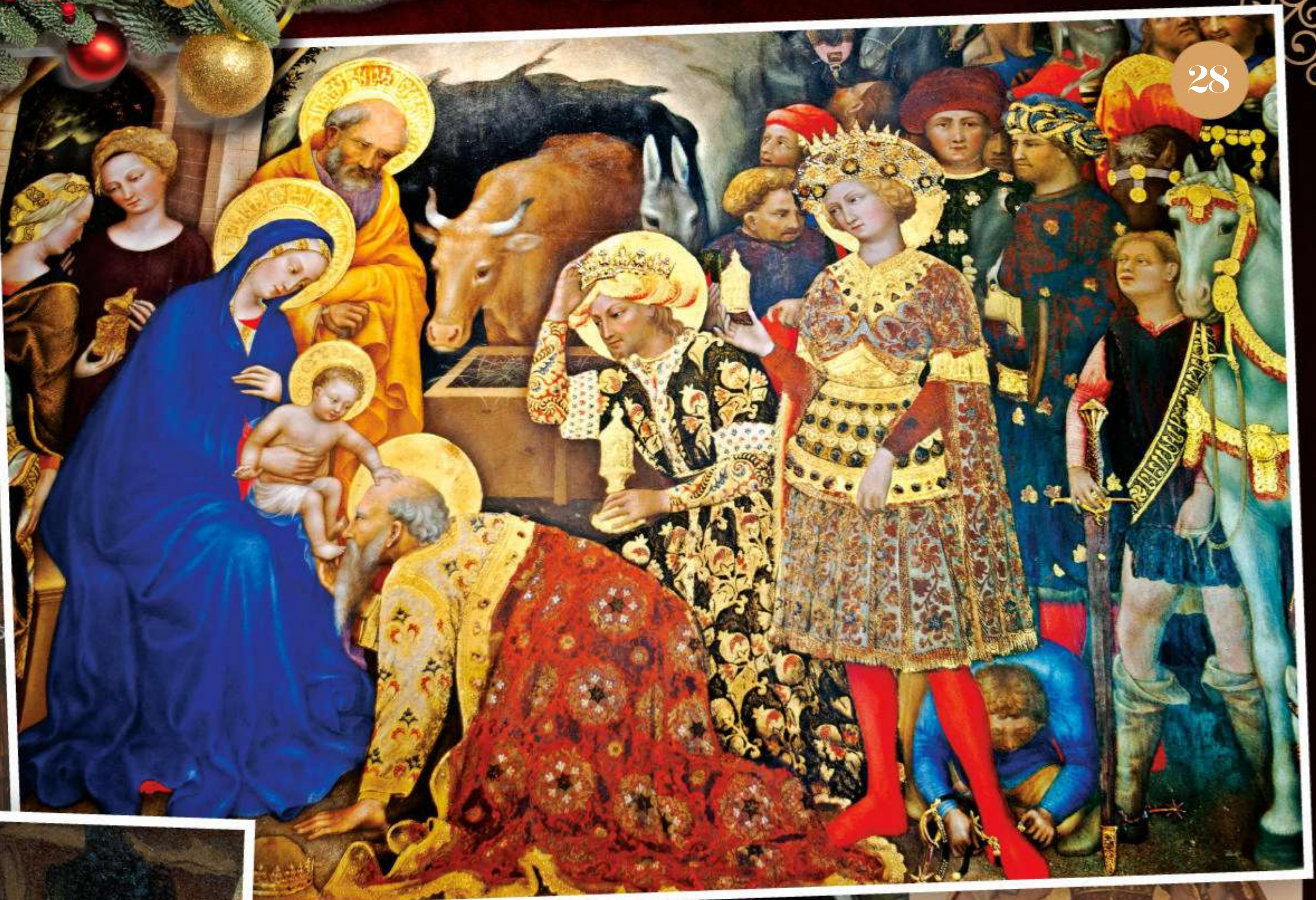

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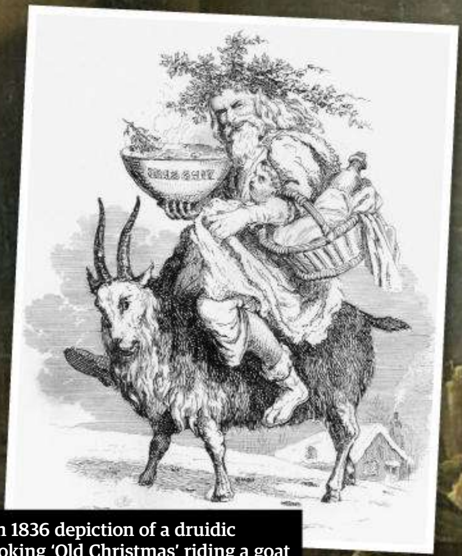
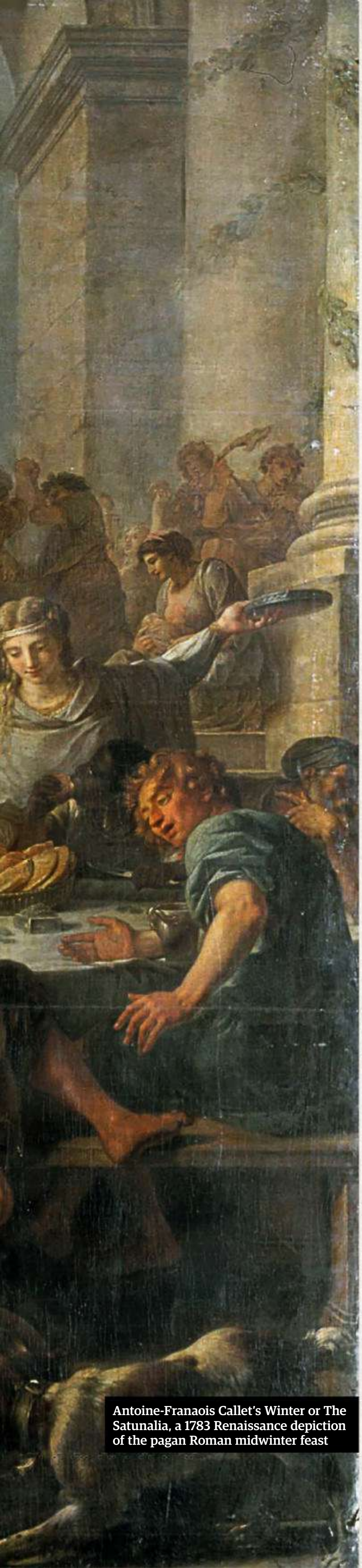


An 1836 depiction of a druidic looking 'Old Christmas' riding a goat



Antoine-Franaois Callet's Winter or The Satunalia, a 1783 Renaissance depiction of the pagan Roman midwinter feast

Pagan Origins

Christmas might be a uniquely Christian celebration but its traditions owe a lot to the pagan people who inhabited the western world long before the birth of Christ, and their festivals to celebrate the winter solstice

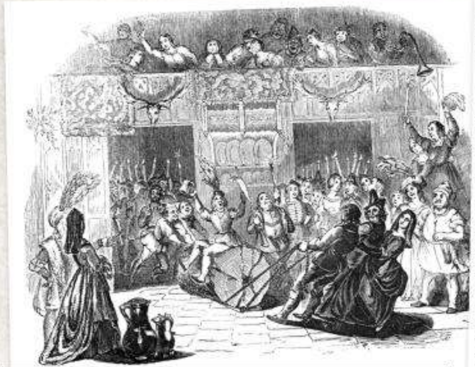
Written by Alice Pattillo

Christmas, literally meaning Christ's Mass, is of course a Christian tradition that arose nearly 2000 years ago in celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. However, it is not the first major festival that occurred around the winter solstice, and while it may or may not have sprung up independently of other midwinter celebrations, both pre-Christian Neolithic beliefs and concurrent pagan pageants have shaped the ways in which we celebrate Christmas today.

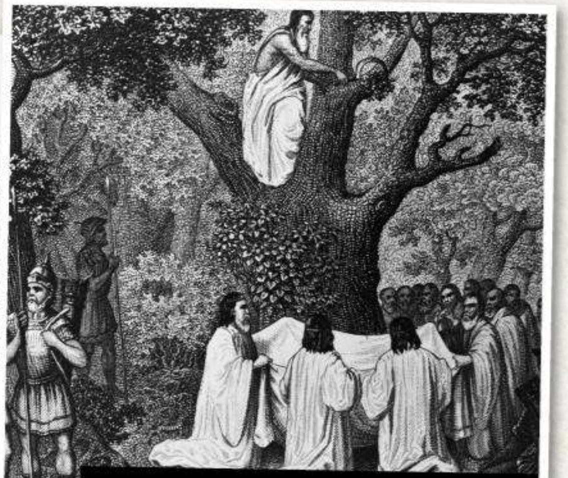
Winter was a terrifying season for our ancestors. In the north, winters were bitterly cold and plagues ran rife as people were cooped up inside, shivering by the fire and picking scraps of food. Many fresh fruit and vegetables were a summer luxury, while livestock had been culled in anticipation of the harsh weather and limited resources. You were lucky to survive the dark, freezing nights without succumbing to starvation, hypothermia or worse. Farmers, warriors and fishermen were all left without work, and the only thing that seemed to flow freely during the bleak midwinter was booze – which was finally fermented and ready to drink, and understandably, many people were keen to drink plenty of it to pass the time. With no clocks, astronomical events guided ancient cultures, and solar occurances such as the winter solstice gave people hope. The longest night gave way to longer days and signs of spring and life would start to creep in. It was therefore a time to celebrate and thank the gods that the winter was almost over. Midwinter solstice was seen as a time of rebirth in many cultures, and was often their New Year. Many of these traditions were then filtered into Christmas, shaping our annual celebrations of the season even today.

Classical Christmas

The first time the date of Christmas was recorded as 25 December is the Roman calendar of Philocaus, produced in 354AD. According to late 4th century Christian writer, Scriptor Syrus, this date was chosen due to a pagan custom celebrating the birth of the sun. This pagan feast only pre-dated the emergence of Christmas by



The Yule log was at the centre of Christmas tradition from the medieval period onwards. It was dragged into the house and lit on the hearth to warm the household during their festivities of eating, drinking, dancing and reciting ghost tales



A 1754 depiction of Celtic druids gathering in and around an oak tree covered with sacred mistletoe

Sol Invictus

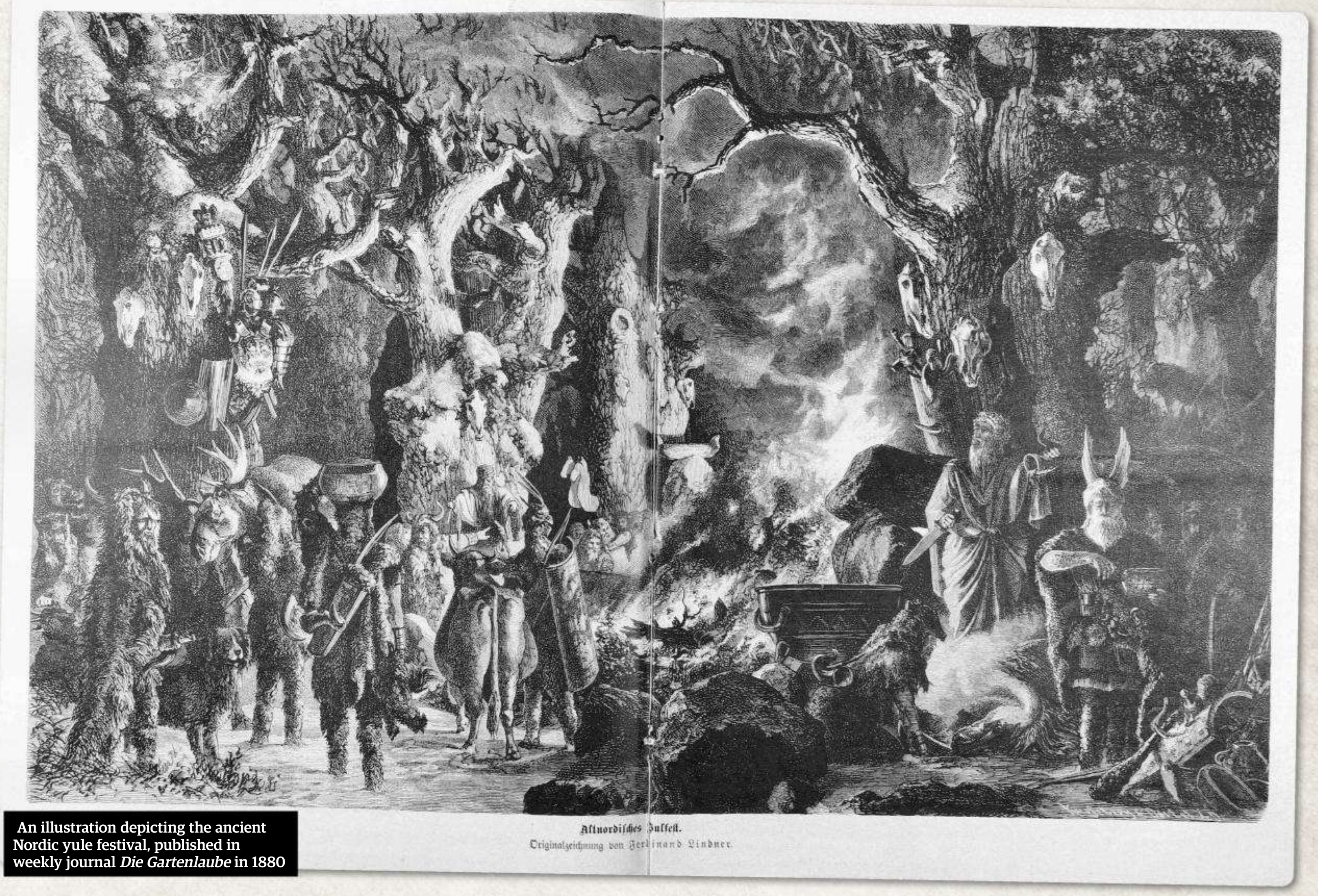
The sun god is a familiar figure, with numerous variations spanning religions across the globe, as the sun is associated with giving and sustaining all life. The sun god is often thought of as the male creation god, in contrast to the female aspect of the moon goddess. In later ancient Egyptian mythology this was the case, with the creator Amun often identified as a solar deity. The Persian sun god was Mithras, and was central to the Roman mystery religion of Mithraism. Mithras is often seen in Roman art banqueting with another deity of Roman religion, Sol Invictus (Latin for "Unconquered Sun"), but the true nature of their relationship is unknown, with some historians contemplating whether they are two versions of the same god, in a similar fashion to how the sun god Helios is often described as the Greek equivalent to Sol. While the identity of Sol Invictus is hotly debated, it is likely just another name for (or indeed incarnation of, as the Romans were always adopting others' similar gods) the established Roman sun god, Sol. It is likely that he gained the epithet "unconquered" due to a cult that had originated in Syria and spread throughout the Roman Empire. In 274CE, Emperor Aurelian established 25 December as Natalis Invicti, the birth of the sun and Sol Invictus' feast day. He had already reformed the Roman cult of Sol, elevating the god to one of the most important gods in the Roman pantheon. Some historians believe that Jesus was envisioned as a Christianised version of Sol Invictus – or indeed a generic pagan sun god, and this is why Christmas is held on 25 December.

A Roman coin depicting Emperor Aurelian with Sol Invictus on the back

a mere century and was an attempt by Roman emperor Aurelian to unite the Roman world in a universal focus on worship, by building upon a Syrian cult of the Unconquered Sun that had spread through the Roman Empire during the second and third centuries. Aurelian's official religion, the cult of Sol Invictus (the Latin term for Unconquered Sun), lasted only until the reign of Constantine I (306-337AD), the first Christian Roman emperor, although, reportedly, Sol Invictus cult followers endured until at least the 5th century. Under Aurelian, a new temple for Sol was built, which was dedicated to the god on 25 December 274 CE. According the the Phiocalian calendar, this date became a feast day known as Natalis Invicti, but this calendar also mentions the birth of Jesus and there is no other reference to an annual celebration held in honor of Sol on this date. In fact, games were held in honor of Sol every three years in late October and even the Syrian predecessor of the Cult of Sol Invictus held its annual feasts in late summer rather than midwinter. Therefore, the date chosen as Christmas may have more to do with the winter solstice than Sol Invictus.

The Romans were not sure of the exact date of the winter solstice – the term itself derived from the Latin term for 'the sun stands still', often citing anywhere from 23 December to 27 December as the shortest day and the longest night. It can't be coincidence then, that 25 December lies right in the middle of this, and in fact, the calendar of Julius Caesar credited the 25th as the solstice, midway between the ancient Roman feast of Saturnalia on 17 December and the Roman New Year celebrations of Kalendae on 1-3 January. These two celebrations share many of the traditions that we now associate with modern Christmas and New Year. Romans would begin the festival of Saturnalia with a sacrifice at the Temple of Saturn – an agricultural deity who had, according to myth, previously ruled the universe during a Golden Age of peace and abundance. Following this ritual, a public banquet was held, known as a lectisternium, complete with an image of the god fashioned as if in attendance. Large-scale carnival-style festivities and feasts would see out the day, with further celebrations continuing for at least two more days (the 17, 18 and 19 were public holidays in which schools, shops and lawcourts were closed), both at home and in public. Saturnalia eventually became a fullblown week-long festival with houses decorated in greenery (sound familiar?). The continued private festivities honored various aspects of life associated with Saturn including role reversal and throwing social norms to the wind. Slaves were treated to a banquet of the calibre that was usually reserved for their masters, and perhaps even dined beside them. It was also a time of mockery and free speech, where people were given a certain behavioural license, dubbed by Horace as "December liberty", and it was the only time of year slaves could get away with answering back or even making fun of their owner. Everyone was required to dress colourfully and do away with the traditional white toga. Gambling was also permitted at Satunalia, something that was usually prohibited and seen as poor taste. There was an appointed King of Saturnalia, the equivalent to the medieval tradition of the Lord of Misrule, and there may have been instances of guising too; but the most important aspect of Saturnalia in regards to its influence on the modern celebration of Christmas was the giving of gifts. On 19 December, the day of Sigilaria (literally translated as gifts of pottery or wax figurines, traditional presents to receive at Saturnalia), gifts were shared and often accompanied by a poetry verse or two, an ancient Christmas card if you will. Interestingly, laurel or evergreen wreaths worn as a crown were a common indication of success in poetry or music, and at Saturnalia, a time of poetry reading and the arts, this image may have been adopted into the crown of thorns we now associate with Jesus Christ. Music, poetry and art have also all survived into the modern Christmas, with carol singing, pantomime and Christmas crafting remaining popular during the festive

> 'Many pre-Christian midwinter festivals share elements of light, greenery, and gift-giving


Altnordiſches Julfeſt.
Originalzeichnung von Ferdinand Lindner.

An illustration depicting the ancient Nordic yule festival, published in weekly journal *Die Gartenlaube* in 1880

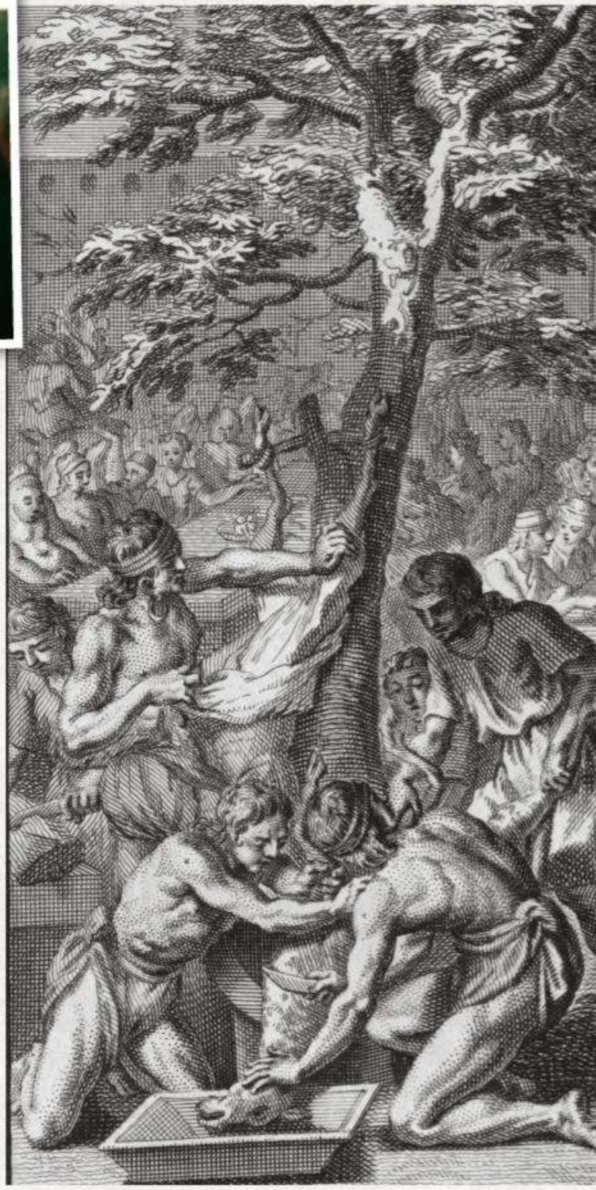
season. Curiously, there is no evidence of theatrical events being a part of the Saturnalia tradition, but the Roman style of comedy, often satirical and poking fun at deities and those in power, no doubt imbued the spirit of the season. When Rome became officially a Christian nation, during the reign of Constantine I, it took a little while for the Romans to fully convert to the new doctrine - and to part with the fun of Saturnalia, which continued to be celebrated for another century by many Romans, although it did lose its original links to Saturn and became more of a midwinter excuse for a frolic (much like Christmas for many modern secular folks). Romans were also known for their religious flexibility, adopting and assimilating aspects of pagan deities and traditions from across the empire into their pantheon, seeing no issue in fusing various religions into their own. It is likely then that this flexibility encouraged them to retain their much-loved seasonal festival, amalgamating it into the new celebration of Christmas.

Along with Saturnia and Kalendae, the ancient Persian winter solstice festival of Yaldā shares some distinct similarities to the modern Christian tradition. Yaldā's origin lies in the mysterious religion of Mithraism, a sect of the ancient monotheistic religion of Zoroastrianism, which heavily influenced the later Abrahamic religions (of which Christianity is one) and which was prevalent across the Roman Empire before the advent of Christianity. Yaldā (meaning 'birth', in reference to the sun god Mithras) is celebrated on or around 21 December. Yaldā Night marks the longest night of the year and represents 'light over darkness', as it ushers in the start of longer days and shorter nights. People still celebrate the festival in modern day Iran and gather to eat, drink and recite poetry (similarly to traditions associated with Saturnalia) and traditional red fruits in the form of watermelon and pomegranates are consumed (symbolising the sun, light and fire) as well as mixed nuts, and fires and candles are lit. It is customary to stay awake as long as possible in order to stay alert and avoid evil and misfortune.

Ancient influences

In the British isles, Neolithic monuments were built in alignment with cardinal points of the sun. The passage grave of Newgrange in Ireland has an aperture above its entrance through which the midwinter rising sun shines, even with the entrance itself concealed. A similar passage grave in Orkney, Scotland, named Maes Howe, also features a gap left above its entrance through which the midwinter sun shines, but it captures the sunset rather than the sunrise. Most notably of all, perhaps, is that the spectacular Stonehenge is aligned in the direction of the sunrise at summer solstice and the sunset at winter solstice. The fact that these highly intricate, sophisticated structures that would have required a huge amount of planning and labour to construct are connected to the cardinal points of the sun indicates that midsummer and midwinter were incredibly important times of the year to prehistoric Britons and of great ritual significance. However, no written records survive relating to either solstice or even a solar deity. In fact, some of the only accounts we have to reflect the pagan past of Britain and Ireland - or indeed any other Celtic nation - cast more reverence upon the equinoxes than the solstices. According to Roman historian Pliny, however, there are some residual Celtic aspects that still lurk in modern day Christmas, namely mistletoe. He wrote that the Celts of Gaul held the parasitic plant sacred, particularly when found near an oak tree. The plant would be gathered on the sixth day of the moon, a day upon which Gallic tribes would traditionally begin their months and years. It appears then, that Gallic Celts were more concerned with the lunar calendar than the solar one.

A photograph from the 1980s capturing the sunrise at Stonehenge on the winter solstice

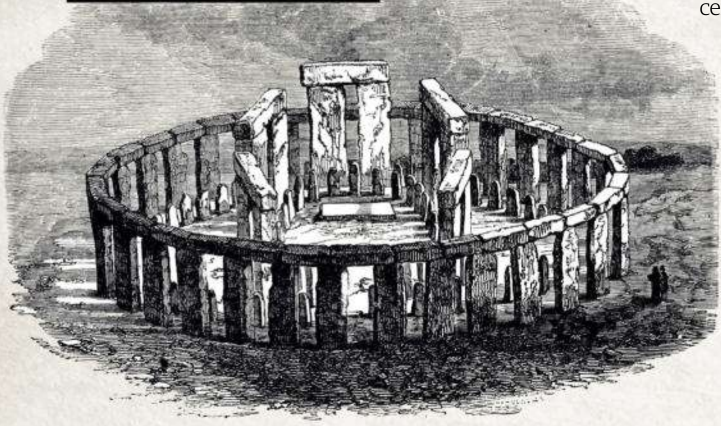


The Anglo-Saxons and "North Men" or "Vikings", as the Scandinavians were often called, shaped the landscape of post-Roman Britain significantly. While the religions of Rome and the Middle East may have had an impact on the arrival of Christmas, earlier Germanic and Scandinavian winter solstice celebrations were perhaps the most influential pre-Christian traditions regarding the way we celebrate Christmas today.

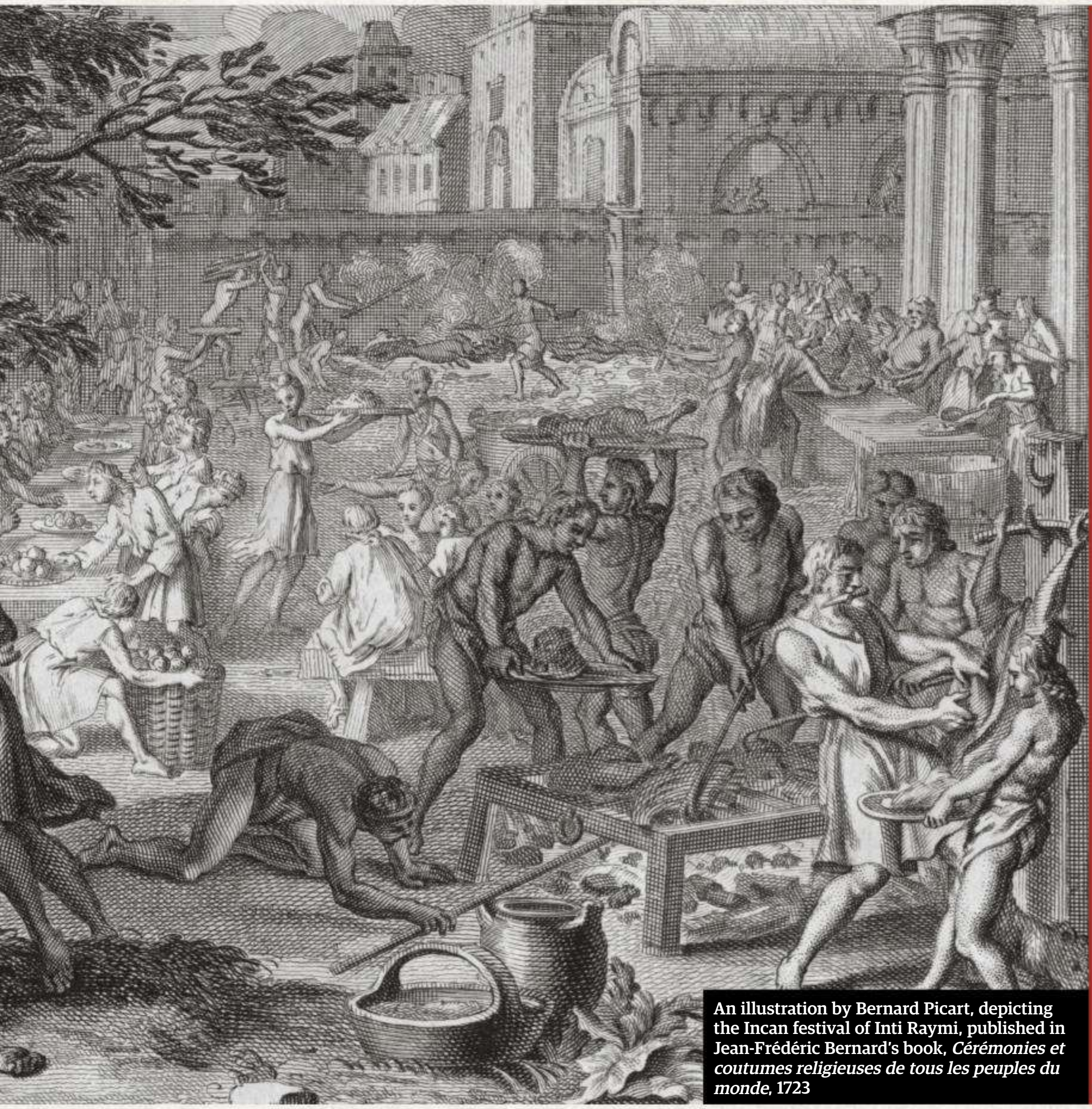
The Anglo-Saxons settled in Britain during the 5th century, originating from a variety of Germanic tribes, and quickly assimilated into life alongside the indigenous Brits. According to the English monk and historian Bede in 730, the most significant annual festival of the English was a celebration they called "Modanicht", meaning "Mother's Night", and was held on Christmas Eve. There is very little information about this elusive night and the rites it entailed, in fact, it may well have been a Christian nativity feast in honor of the Virgin Mary. Indeed, Anglo-Saxons, despite converting to Christianity by the 7th century, still referred to Christmas simply as Midwinter as late as 1038 – the same year in which the term "Cristes Maessan", Christmas, first appears. While Mother's Night may have developed out of Christianity, it also could have equally existed as a pre-Christian pagan sacrificial rite in honor of the collective ancestral mothers, deities such as the Norse norns and disir, who were said to have their annual blot (sacrificial holiday) during the undoubtedly pagan feast, the Norse Winter Nights – held in October, around the time of Halloween. In 725, Bede claimed that the pagan calendar shared by the Britons, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings and other Germanic groups combined the Roman months of December and January, referring to the period as Giuli. This time began essentially at winter solstice, when the daylight slowly started to creep back in and winter was thankfully coming to an end. This period was considered a time of rebirth and celebration, as life was returning to the earth.

The term Yule is a word we commonly use as a synonym for Christmas, and is a colloquial Scandinavian term for the three days over Christmas or Winter Solstice. The word derives from the Old Norse "jol" the origin of which is largely unknown. Yule itself may have developed in reference to the Christian festival, but there is evidence that it is likely a much older term. 13th century Icelandic scholar Snorri Sturluson explained a pattern in Old Nordic tradition of sacrificing first during the Winter Nights, in order to initiate an easy winter season, secondly at Yule for a good crop, and for success in battle on Summer's Day (in April). According to Sturluson, Yule lasted three nights, beginning on winter solstice night (although this exact date is speculated by modern scholars) and the Norse new year and the festival had been adapted into and moved to the same date as the feast of the nativity by the Christian king of Norway, Haakon the Good, during the 10th century. A tried and tested way to garner support from pesky pagans was to assimilate their most popular pastimes and simply transfer all honour to the Christian God. Whether or not the term Yule was used for the pre-Christian pageant, midwinter undoubtedly harboured an important sacrificial feast that began the year in Scandinavia. This Pagan Yule was a Norse "blot", where a public feast was held at a heathen temple where ale was consumed in gallons – in fact Haakon passed a law to ensure enough ale would be made available. As with all blots, it was quite the blood bath. Animals were sacrificed to the gods and sacrificial blood was collected and dispersed all over the pedestals of the idols, smeared upon the temple walls and splattered upon faces using sacrificial twigs. The meat of the animals was then cooked and consumed (a boar's head often as the centrepiece), fires were lit in the centre of the temple and kettles hung above them. There were toasts to the gods Odin, Njörðr and Freyr to welcome a good harvest next season and inspire peace and prosperity, as well as in honour of all those who had departed in the past year.

When the Vikings began settling in Britain during the 8th century, they brought their raucous winter solstice frolics with them, much to the Christian Saxons' dismay. Between the 4th and 11th centuries there are no further mentions of the



A 19th century artist's impression of Stonehenge, as it is believed to have looked when built



An illustration by Bernard Picart, depicting the Incan festival of Inti Raymi, published in Jean-Frédéric Bernard's book, *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*, 1723

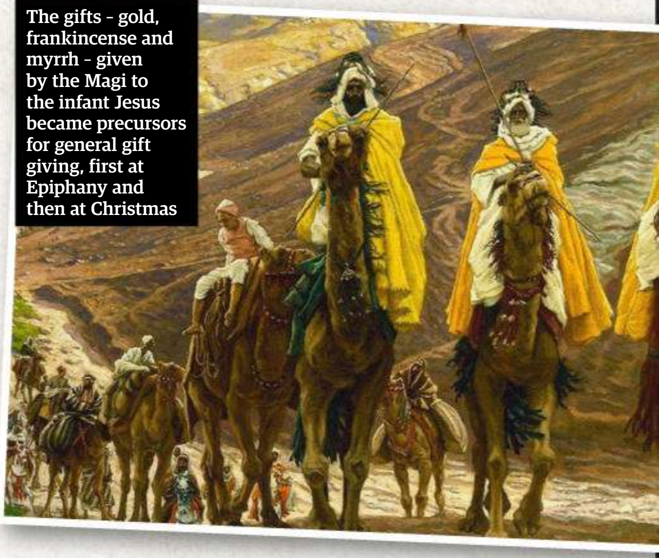
The bleak midwinter

Winter solstice has long been observed by ancient civilisations across the globe. With midwinter ushering in the return of longer days and shorter nights, there are many beliefs surrounding the solstice that have transcended cultures since the dawn of time. Lore regarding fears of the darkness, rituals surrounding death and rebirth – particularly the return of the sun, new beginnings and new year cycles, celebrations involving alcohol, and facing our own mortality, are all aspects of various winter solstice celebrations across the globe. In Jewish tradition, the days leading up to the winter solstice should be spent fasting and praying as legend has it that Adam (the first man) believed the shorter nights indicated impending death. At winter solstice, he rejoiced with a feast. In the Americas, the Incas used to celebrate Inti Raymi on the winter solstice, in honor of their most venerated deity, the sun god Inti. Lasting nine days, there were sacrifices to ensure a good harvest season, colourful dances and processions. In India, Hindus observe the festival of Makar Sankranti in honor of the sun goddess Surya. Held at the beginning of January, it marks the end of the month with the longest night. Praying and charity are elements of the festival that are shared with Christmas. In Japan, Dongzhi – meaning the extreme of winter – is held at the winter solstice and was originally a harvest celebration. Today, people celebrate with dumplings, red beans, and family parties, while also ensuring they ward off any evil spirits.

Roman pagan festival of Saturnia in contemporary records, but the pagan midwinter and new year feasts of ancient Northern Europe continued to disrupt the church for centuries, proving that the Norse were not willing to let go of their solstice celebrations, whether continuing them under the guise of Christianity or not.

Between 1005 and 1008, the Archbishop of York condemned the Viking settlement's New Year's Day festivities as sorcery and in the late 12th century, the Bishop of Exeter served penance for "those who keep the New Year with heathen rites". One 14th century text references, and warns against, the use of magic on New Year's Day, while another 15th century work referenced the tradition of New Year divination. The idea that Yuletide, or at least winter (beginning, in some traditions, at Halloween), is when the veil between worlds is lifted, making it the perfect time for magic and fortune-telling, continued well into the modern era and can be seen in various forms of later folklore. The Norse also told tales of undead creatures called the draugr, who wandered the earth at this time of year, sparking centuries of spooky Christmastide stories of ghosts and spirits.

Yuletide was also the time that the folkloric Wild Hunt would ride, in some traditions led by the all-father, Odin. This ghostly legend spread throughout Western Europe, and always rode between Halloween and New Year. The trope could be an indication that the midwinter pagan Germanic festivities had grown out of a Stone and Bronze Age festival for the dead and reverence of the ancestors – and similar festivals can be seen during this season in numerous cultures across the world. Many Yule traditions most likely stemmed out of this pre-Christian feast and managed to survive into the modern day, becoming popular modern Christmas customs. Odin is also referred to as the Yule Father, and early incarnations of Santa Claus may have possibly been inspired by him. The Yule Father was known to ride in a sleigh pulled by his eight-legged horse, Slepnir, often gave out gifts, and disguised himself as an old man with a wide-brimmed hat – a common description of Santa prior to the Victorian drawings of cartoonist Thomas Nast, who produced the modern look of Father Christmas. The Yule Goat, likely stemming from kid goats being sacrificed to the Norse agricultural god Njörðr, became a symbol of Christmas and one of its gift-bringers; the Yule Log is still burned to ward off evil spirits and also now eaten as cake; and Yule singing became carolling. The Yule Boar, an offering to harvest god Freyr, has been retained in the form of the tradition of Christmas ham and in medieval England, the tradition's origins were credited to a scholar choking a boar on the way to Christmas mass. In the medieval world, all of these disparate traditions were brought together under Christianity, and became part of Christmas.



The gifts - gold, frankincense and myrrh - given by the Magi to the infant Jesus became precursors for general gift giving, first at Epiphany and then at Christmas

In the Bleak Midwinter

Christmas is celebrated on 25 December, so that must be Jesus's date of birth. Or is it?

Written by Edoardo Albert

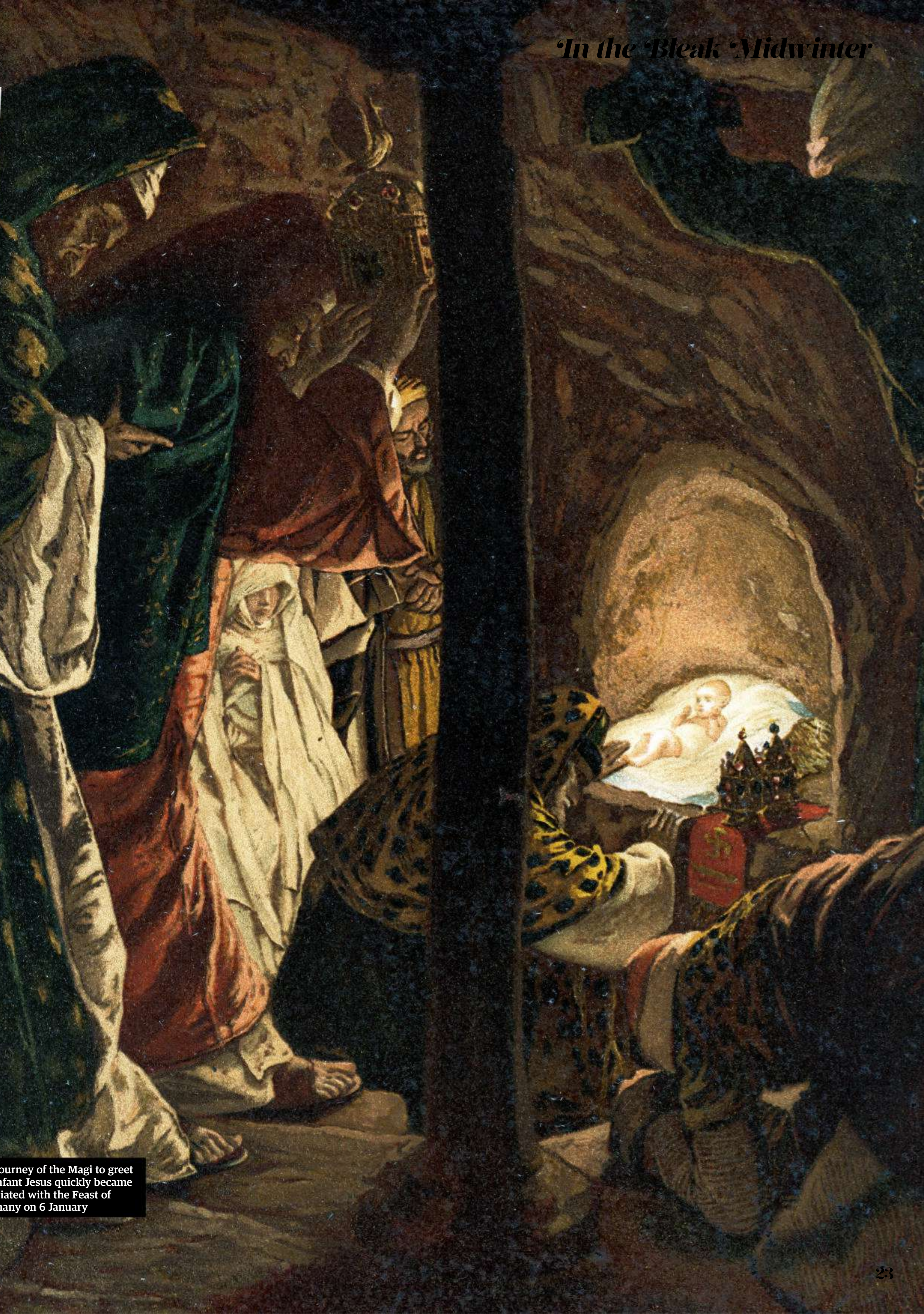
The first Christians went out into the world spreading the news of the death and resurrection of Jesus. As such, by far the most important festival for them was Easter. The rituals for the feast grew to include the whole of Holy Week and then expanded further with 40 days of Lent before Easter and the feast of Pentecost after Easter. Epiphany, the feast of Christ's baptism, was added to the liturgical calendar on 6 January by at least the early 200s and it soon became associated with the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus. In the Eastern Orthodox churches, Epiphany remains the feast most associated with present giving to commemorate Jesus's birth.

But the actual date of Jesus' birth was not easy to work out. Indeed, the monk who devised the BC/AD system of calculating dates got it wrong: King Herod died by 2 BC at the latest and more probably in 4 BC, so Jesus was actually born before the calendar says he was. This might sound like a silly mistake on the part of Dionysius Exiguus but systematising dates at a time when they were set down according to the reigns of emperors, consuls and governors, the foundation of Rome and other events was an incredibly difficult task. As to the actual date of Jesus' birth, early Christian writers offered differing ideas, mostly based on theological predictions of what would have been the most appropriate day for his birth. We now use BCE/CE dates to refer to the Common Era.

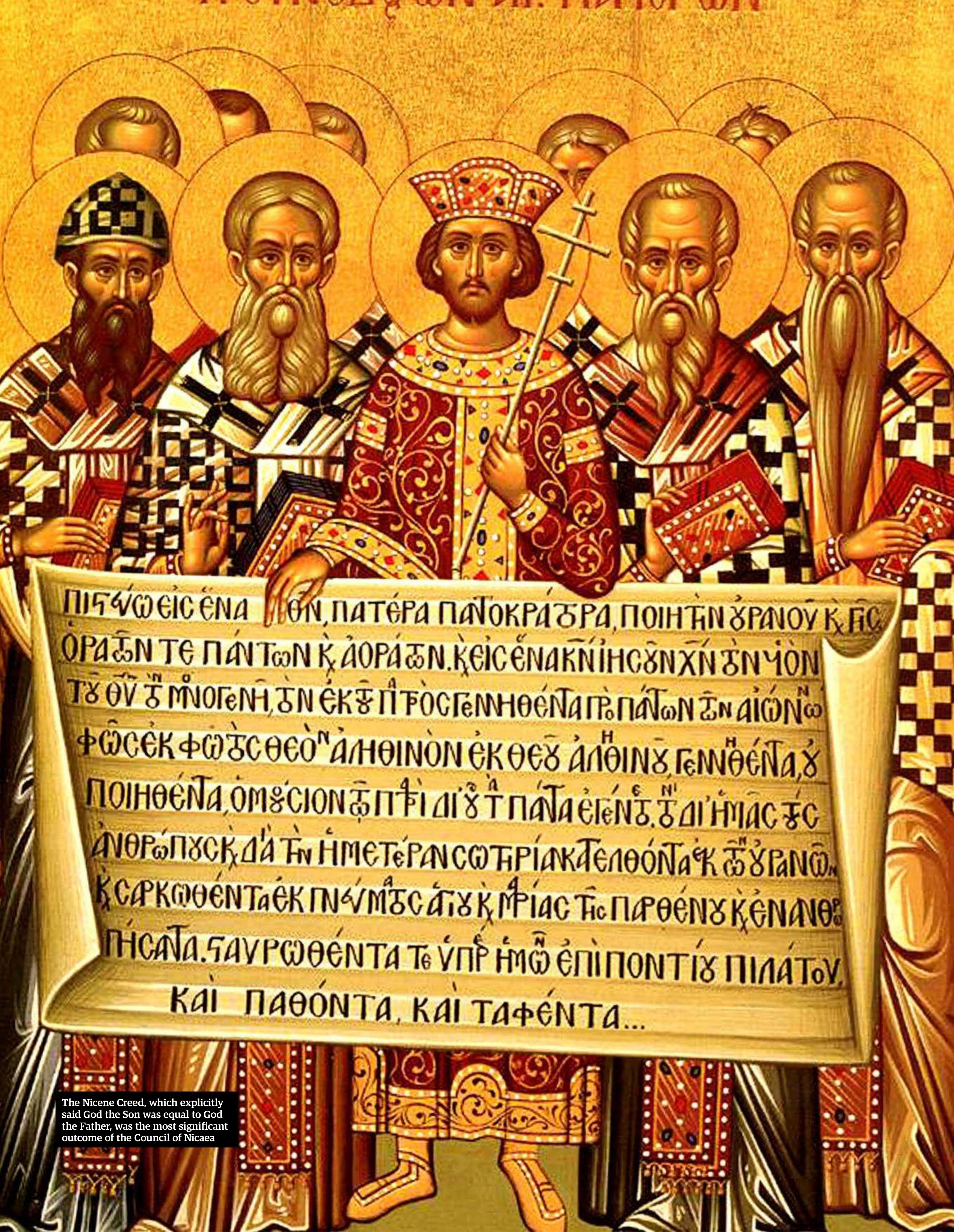
In the early 3rd century, the historian Sextus Julius Africanus wrote a chronology of the world based upon biblical evidence in which he placed the date of the Annuciation (that is, Jesus's conception) on 25 March. Nine months from that date gives us 25 December as Jesus' date of birth. Africanus' work has not survived but it was much quoted in early Church authors, indicating that it was widely read and influential.

Following the historical traces of Christmas on, by 353/54 Christmas was given as the eighth day of the Kalends of January (that is 25 December) in the Chronograph of 354, a calendar produced by the calligrapher Furius Dionysius Filocalus. The dating information in the Chronograph dates from about 20 years earlier so we know that Christmas was being celebrated in Rome by at least 350 CE. Within 50 years, Christmas had become firmly established as one of the great feasts of the Church, alongside Easter, Pentecost and Epiphany.

With little knowledge of the exact date of Jesus's birthday, the question arises as to whether these early Christians knew the real birthdate of Jesus or timed their feast to coincide with the pagan Roman feast of Sol Invictus, also held on 25 December. A later Christian writer, Scriptor Syrus, stated as much. However, Scriptor Syrus (who is actually anonymous) wrote sometime after 1171, putting him a long, long time after these events. Moreover, the first mention of a Roman pagan festival occurring on 25 December appears in the very same Chronograph of 354 that also records that date as the birth of Christ. As such, there is no way to say for sure which feast came first or if the two feasts grew together.



The journey of the Magi to greet the infant Jesus quickly became associated with the Feast of Epiphany on 6 January


ΚΑΙ ΠΑΘΟΝΤΑ, ΚΑΙ ΤΑΦΕΝΤΑ...

The Nicene Creed, which explicitly said God the Son was equal to God the Father, was the most significant outcome of the Council of Nicaea

Son of God?

What did it mean to be the son of God? In the 4th century, Christians had to answer that question definitively

Written by Edoardo Albert

What was Jesus? This was the question that came to preoccupy Christians in the 4th century. They knew who Jesus was, they knew where and when he had lived and died, and lived again. But in the 4th century the question of what he *was* split the Roman Empire in half. Jesus himself claimed a number of titles, most frequently Son of Man, but also Son of God. The early Church had proclaimed him God and man. But these Christians were living in a time when even the most bloodstained pervert wearing the imperial purple could declare himself a living god. Gods in the shape of men were the common currency of belief. However, the early Church declared that Jesus was not merely one god among many but rather the creator of heaven and earth, the One God who became Man.

It pushed human credulity. After all, would the all-powerful creator of everything really accept being born into poverty and then dying on a cross? Surely it made more sense for God to have sent his agent to do this work for him – call him a son if you must but Jesus was clearly created, in the working out of time, by God to carry out the task appointed to him.

This was the case put forward by the presbyter Arius (c.256-336 CE) and it rapidly gained ground, particularly among a population who had not given much thought to the details of their belief. But for the Church bishops who gathered at the Council of Nicaea in 325, these were not details but the foundations of their belief. Emperor Constantine called the council to sort out these outstanding matters of doctrine and among the attendees was the Bishop of Myra, Nicholas – the same St Nicholas that is now the Santa Claus of Christmas gift-giving. Nicholas was particularly scathing about the heretical beliefs of the Arians – a later account says he got so cross he slapped one of the heretics across the face. But why was it so important? If Jesus was not God, God in the fullest sense, then Jesus' redemption was not all-embracing. And certainly his human birth, marked at Christmas, wasn't as important or worthy of celebration if that was the case.

After his outburst Nicholas was locked up for the rest of the meeting, and his bishop's robes were taken from him. During the night, he had a vision of Jesus and Mary, who asked him why he was imprisoned. On receiving his answer, that it was for love of them, Jesus presented him with a book of the gospels and Mary with a priestly robe. The next morning, Nicholas' jailers found him miraculously clothed as a bishop once more and reading scripture. Seeing this, the Council thought it best to take his side and declared that Jesus was truly God, formulating the Nicene Creed to express that belief. This combined with his famous gift-giving gave Nicholas a strong association with Christmas.

Arianism endured for two centuries more among the Germanic tribes who had conquered northern Europe, only slowly dying out, so Christmas remained unimportant there for some time. But the coronation of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor in Rome by the Pope on Christmas Day 800 CE saw the descendants of those Germanic tribes embrace the Catholic Church and dedicate themselves to it as protectors. Christmas, the Emperor and Rome became united in the empire the Franks were restoring.

Each of the four advent candles represents someone in the nativity story, with the centre white candle being lit on Christmas Day

Celebrating Advent

Uncover how the way we celebrate the lead-up to Christmas has changed over the years

Written by Katharine Marsh

When it comes to deciding when to start celebrating Christmas and getting those decorations up, many people have one date they wait for: the beginning of Advent. Spanning the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day right up to Christmas Eve, its history goes back to about 480 CE.

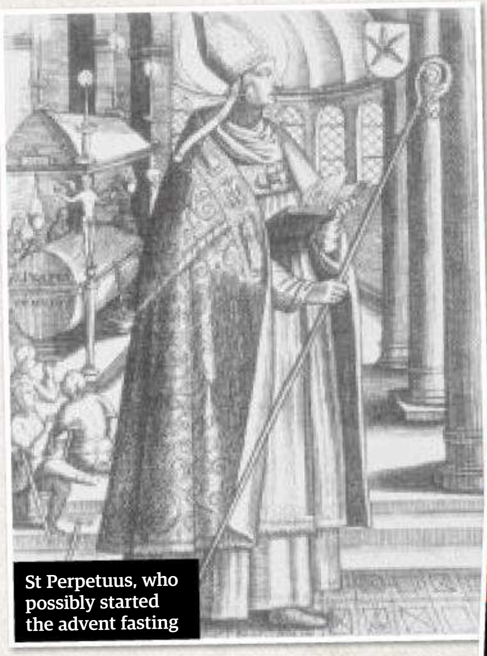
Undoubtedly a highlight of the Christian calendar, Advent – from the Latin word 'adventus', meaning 'coming' – is the preparation for the birth of Jesus, the 'Light of the World' coming to end the darkness of winter. But it has always had a second meaning, and in the past the church would take the chance to reflect on the prophesied Second Coming, when Jesus would rise again to save the world from its sins.

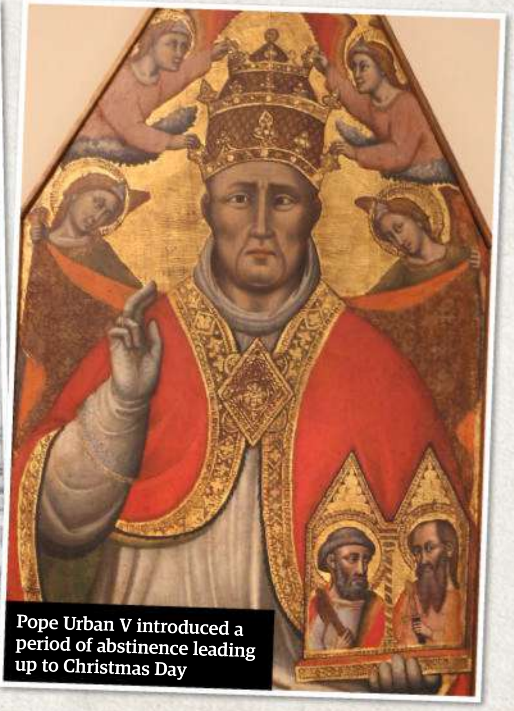
The oldest extant document mentioning Advent comes from St Gregory of Tours, who claims that one of his predecessors, St Perpetuus, decreed a fast three times a week from the feast of St Martin (11 November) until Christmas Day around 480 CE. It was almost like a parallel to the Lent period before Easter, and it continued, even so far as to be called 'St Martin's Lent' in the 560s. The fasting spread from France to England, Italy, Germany, Spain and beyond. Fasting would fall out of fashion, and in 1362 it was replaced by a period of abstinence, as introduced by Pope Urban V. However, the Greek Orthodox Church continues to observe fasting through Advent starting from 14 November; flesh meat, butter, milk and eggs are all banned.

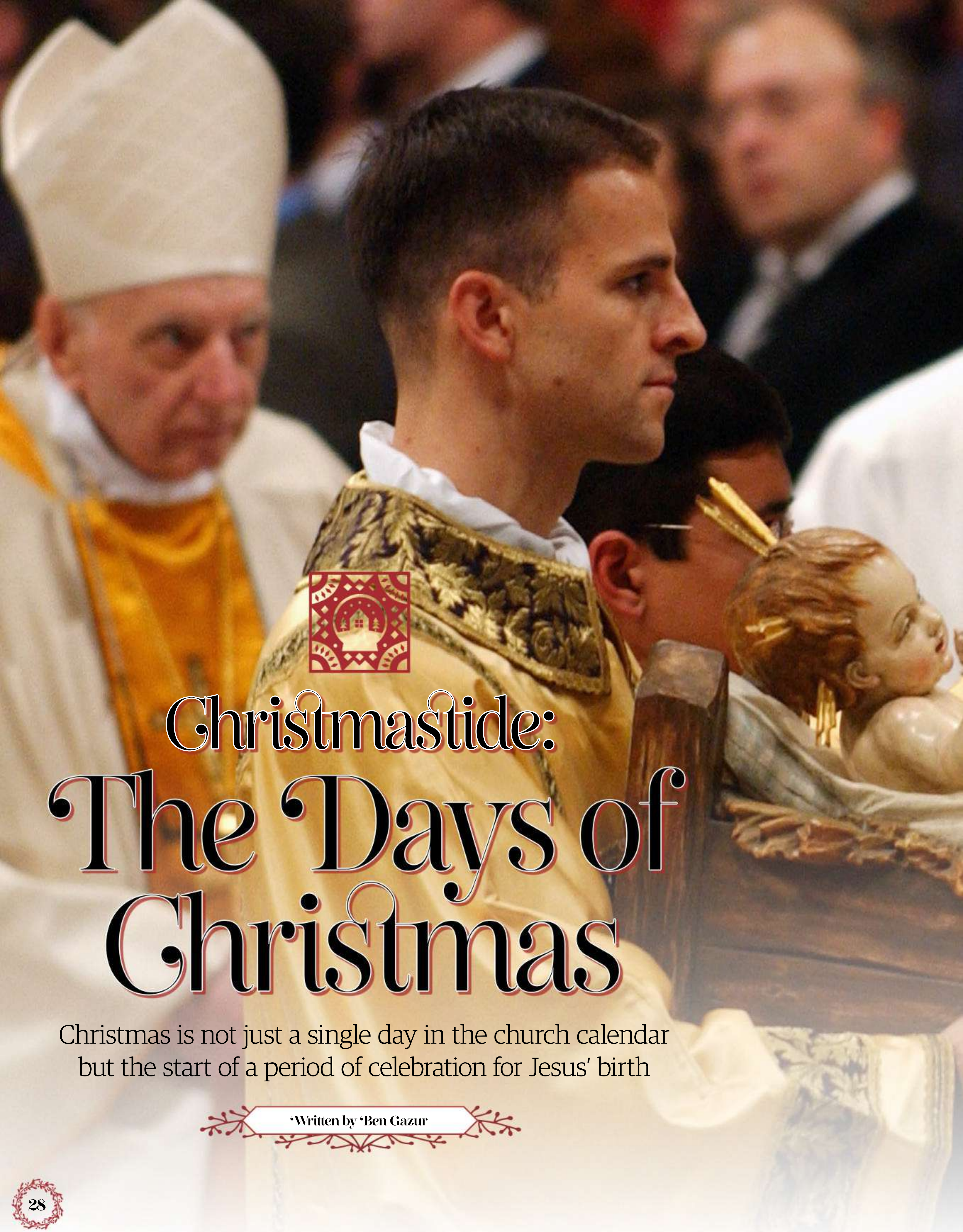
In Western Christianity, the liturgical colour for Advent has been violet since the 13th century. Some denominations, like the Lutheran Church of Sweden, use blue instead, to represent the hope that the season brings.

When it comes to celebration, there is a whole host of services and musical events that take place throughout the season. Each Sunday of Advent is dedicated to different members of the Christmas story (week one is for the Patriarchs, week two for the Prophets, week three for John the Baptist and week four is for the Virgin Mary), and many churches hold extra events like Nine Lessons and Carols, Christingle and Carols by Candlelight.

Over time, Advent has become more of a time for celebration than penance. With wreaths, calendars, music and more, it is now mainly celebrated as a season of hope and joy – the perfect way to start off the liturgical year.


St Perpetuus, who possibly started the advent fasting


Pope Urban V introduced a period of abstinence leading up to Christmas Day



Christmastide:

The Days of Christmas

Christmas is not just a single day in the church calendar but the start of a period of celebration for Jesus' birth

Written by Ben Gazur

Christmas has traditionally been one of the most important periods in both church and secular calendars. It began as a day of celebration for the birth of Jesus, who Christians believe is the son of God, with a mass in church – literally 'Christ mass'.

The nativity, the story of Jesus' birth, has grown in importance across the centuries. The idea that God would take on human form to give humanity an opportunity of salvation was vital to the lives of millions. Commemorating the day Jesus appeared offered a focal point for worship and community to Christians.

In the calendars of many churches Christmas is not a single day however. It is just the beginning of a longer season that focuses on the nativity of Jesus. From 25 December until the celebration of Epiphany on 6 January there are a number of important church dates that are marked each year. Even in secular society few people would think Christmas lasts just one day given the long built up to the day itself and the long recovery that lasts into the new year.

Christmastide, the season of Christmas, was first declared in 567 CE by the Council of Tours as 12 days of sacred festivity. This was the period of celebration that followed the fasting and deprivation of Advent. For Christians this was a way of distinguishing the drab and hopeless world before Jesus and the miraculous joy of God being made manifest among humans. In the medieval church this period of festivity was lengthened to 40 days which lasted from Christmas to Candlemas.

While some of the days which make up Christmastide have fallen out of popular celebration in Britain and elsewhere, they remain important dates in others. Each day is tied to specific traditions, church services, and folklore. Each of the days of Christmastide can boast its own unique flavour and significance.

The Start of Christmas

Waking up on Christmas morning to piles of gifts is just the first event that marks the opening of Christmastide

For millions of people Christmas Day very literally begins at 12am. Many Christians attend a church service that starts as the clock ticks over into the 25 December.

The tradition of holding a mass at midnight began in the early 5th century but spread throughout Catholic Europe in the Middle Ages. Today the Pope actually holds a mass several hours before midnight and it is referred to as the Mass During the Night, but many other denominations continue to hold their first Christmas service at midnight. In Spanish-speaking countries this is known as Misa de Gallo - the Rooster's Mass - because it takes place so early.

These early masses are often cause for festivity, with meals either before or after the service. In

A Merry Christmas

Today most children look forward to a visit from Father Christmas but Christmas has much more going on than presents

12 Days Carol

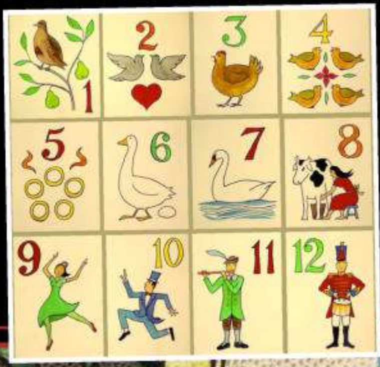
No one likes a person who brags about how many Christmas presents they got, but one of the best loved carols is told from the point of view of someone who had a very bountiful season. *The 12 Days of Christmas* was first printed in 1780 and has been a staple of caroling ever since.

The song recounts the gifts given by a lover over the 12 days of Christmastide. Beginning with a partridge in a pear tree the lucky singer receives two turtle doves, three French hens, four colly birds, five gold rings, six geese a-laying, seven swans a-swimming, eight maids a-milking, nine ladies dancing, ten lords a-leaping, eleven pipers piping, and twelve drummers drumming. In total 78 gifts are given, or 364 if you count each time a present is mentioned.

In 2021 the cost of all this largesse was calculated. If 78 gifts are given then it would take $41,205 (£31,000) to buy them all. This includes the rental cost of the various lords and ladies hired for the day.

Alternative versions of the song have been collected that include ships a-sailing and bears a-baiting. While many people sing about 'calling birds' the more traditional lyrics refer to colly birds. These are blackbirds, called colly due to their coal-like appearance.

***The 12 Days of Christmas* is a huge list of presents. Its significance is debated but it's thought it was once a memory game**



Poland, Wigilia suppers are eaten before attending Pasterka - the Shepherds' Mass. Traditionally these meals are eaten once the first star is seen in the sky on Christmas Eve. Christmas morning is then greeted with a large breakfast. Food and feasting has long been a part of the Christmas tradition wherever it is observed.

In the past the period of Advent was a time of fasting and penitence in the build-up to Christmas. Fasting was not universally practiced but some form of abstinence might be expected. For Christians the arrival of Christmas and the birth of Jesus gave them all the excuse they needed to let loose and toast the day with food and drink.

While Christmas has become increasingly secularised it remains the busiest day for many churches. Attendance at services is usually at its highest and several masses or events may be held across the day itself. Because Christmas has long been a public holiday in traditionally Christian nations, people have always had more opportunity to visit churches, as well as spend their free time on other activities.

One of the most widespread traditions is the giving of gifts on Christmas. Several stories are linked to why exactly presents are exchanged on this day. Some link it directly to the Magi who presented the infant Jesus with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Others tell the story of how the 4th century St Nicholas provided gifts to poor people. Because there are a range of gift-givers in the folklore of Christmas it is not always on Christmas morning that presents are given but in western culture it is the most widespread and popular occasion.

Stir-up Sunday is named for a line in a prayer, which became a reminder to make the Christmas pudding

The central act for many at Christmas is the consumption of a sumptuous meal. The specific meal eaten changes from culture to culture. In Britain most families will sit down to a roast dinner of turkey and all the trimmings. Around 10 million turkeys are eaten each Christmas. While historically other meats like beef, goose, or even a boar's head were the heart of the feast. Turkeys have been popular in Britain since at least the 16th century.

Other countries prefer other meats. In Central Europe it is common to find a large roast carp as the main course on the Christmas table. Fish is also served in Scandinavia. In Portugal it is salted cod that graces the table.

Sweet treats also form a central part of Christmas traditions. From the ubiquitous marzipan of Germany, to the striped candy canes of the United States, conspicuous consumption of sugar is one of the marks of a successful festive period.

The winter was often a lean season for many people when food was relatively scarce or expensive. By providing a feast on Christmas they were looking forward to a bountiful year ahead. These foods could be stored for long periods because of their sugar, or alcoholic, content, which spread the cost of the meal. A traditional Christmas pudding is made on Stir-up Sunday, the Sunday before Advent, when the whole household comes together to mix the pudding before it is put away to mature. Panettone, Buche de Noel, and Stollen are all rich and sweet cakes that would have fortified hungry mouths at Christmas.

The Feast of St Stephen on 26 December is a public holiday in many countries. The day is marked by more feasting and celebration where it is celebrated. Some use the opportunity to consume what was left over from the day before. In Catalonia rich pasta dishes are filled with the meat that was not eaten on Christmas day. Other traditions are more esoteric, however.

In Ireland St Stephen's Day is known as Wren Day. One explanation for this is that according to legend God once challenged all birds to see who could fly the highest. As the contest went on most of the birds dropped out from exhaustion, but the eagle continued to soar ever higher. Just as the eagle tired, however, a wren, which had hidden itself under the eagle's wings, fluttered out and claimed the prize as king of the birds.

The celebrants of Wren Day used to dress up and hunt a wren. When the bird was caught it was imprisoned and placed on the top of a staff. The crowd would then parade it through the streets and sing a song calling for those present to give them gifts. Today the wren at the centre of the ceremony is fake, but the mummers who sing remain. Some dress in long costumes made of straw. Not many wren hunts still take place but it is common for Irish people to spend the day visiting friends and family.

As St Stephen was the patron saint of horses many rituals developed in Europe about using his day to bless horses. Riders bring their horses through the streets and up to the door of a church where a priest waits to bless them for the coming year. In Austria the horses also receive a meal of blessed bread and salt.

Pranks and Boy Bishops

The middle days of Christmastide are less celebrated than the others but contain some of the stranger traditions of the season

The 27th day of December is the feast day of St John the Apostle, also known as John the Beloved. He was considered by many Christians to be the author of the Gospel of John, several letters of the New Testament, and the Book of Revelation. Modern scholars doubt that he did actually write these but he remains an important saint in the history of Christianity.

In the Bible, John was one of the disciples of Jesus, along with his brother James. The Gospel of John describes one of the apostles as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" and historically this was thought to refer to John himself. At the Last Supper John is thought to have reclined beside Jesus. After Jesus' death, John was called one of the pillars of and main influences on the early church. Tradition has it that John was the only one of the disciples to die a natural death and that he lived to a great age.

The feast of St John is not generally a time of festivity but is rather one of quiet reflection on the saint most closely associated with Jesus.

28 December commemorates one of the darkest moments in the nativity story and yet was once a day of pranks and ribaldry. The feast of the Holy Innocents recalls the murder of all male infants in Bethlehem under the age of two that was ordered by King Herod as he attempted to kill Jesus. The Catholic church considers these children to be the first martyrs as they died for Jesus' sake.

Understandably many considered the day which these babies were slaughtered on to be one of ill omen. Bad luck was supposed to be particularly likely to occur on this day. The British referred to the day as Childermas and many activities were banned to try and ward off bad luck. No laundry could be done, no new enterprises should be started, and certainly no marriages should be solemnised on this day. King Louis XI of France, known as Louis the Prudent, was very particular about not doing anything on this day of the feast for fear of bad luck. He took this further by trying not to do anything on the same day of the week as the feast fell in a particular year. For the rest of the year he considered that day to be stained with bad luck. One minister recalled his fear of presenting his master with an emergency that required his attention on those days.

One of the few things that could be done, and was into the 17th century, was the whipping of children in their beds to remind them of the suffering of the Holy Innocents. In some places however, it was quite the reverse. In Germany children were allowed to whip whoever they liked with small twigs and branches. This perhaps was a means of children getting revenge on behalf of the murdered infants. In Central Europe boys would whip girls as a form of providing them with luck, while chanting this song:

"Many years of healthy life,
Happy girl, happy wife:
Many children, hale and strong,
Nothing harmful, nothing wrong,
Much to drink and more to eat;
Now we kindly beg a treat!"

The idea of children taking charge on Childermas is an ancient one. In the Middle Ages it was common for a Boy Bishop to be elected for a period that lasted until the feast of the Holy Innocents. This child would often be chosen from among the choristers of a cathedral and dressed in the vestments of a bishop. The boys of the cathedral then took charge of the running of the church. They would parade around the town and bless people while collecting money for the church. The tradition was ended in England under Henry VIII, possibly because he felt it ridiculed the hierarchy

Timeline

The 12 Days of Christmas

Defining moment

Christmas
25 December

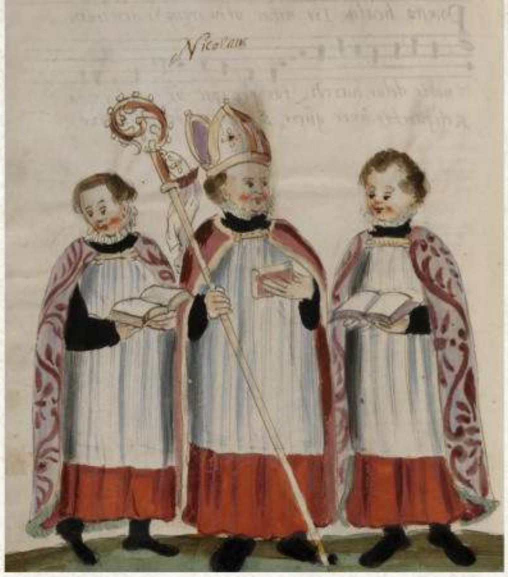
The feast of Jesus' birth marks the beginning of Christmastide. Many Christians gather in churches to pray and to observe the special nature of the day. Gifts are traditionally given to family and friends and large meals eaten to toast the festivity. In some places good children can expect a visit from Saint Nicholas or Father Christmas who will bring them treats. Much folklore has evolved surrounding Christmas traditions and the proper way to mark the day. Today Christmas is a secular as well as a religious holiday that has come to dominate the December calendar.

St Stephen's Day
St Stephen was one of the first Christian martyrs and this day marks his feast in the church calendar. In Britain it is known as Boxing Day from the 18th century practice of giving Christmas Boxes of food to the poor.
26 December

Feast of St John the Apostle
The feast day of St John the Apostle commemorates "the disciple whom Jesus loved as a brother." Tradition holds that he is the author of several books of the New Testament.
27 December

Feast of the Holy Innocents
The Bible tells the story of how king Herod ordered the deaths of male infants in Bethlehem to ensure Jesus was killed. These slain children were considered to be martyrs by many Christians.
28 December

Feast of St Thomas Becket
Thomas Becket became one of the most important British saints following his murder in Canterbury cathedral by soldiers acting, as they believed, for King Henry II in 1170.
29 December

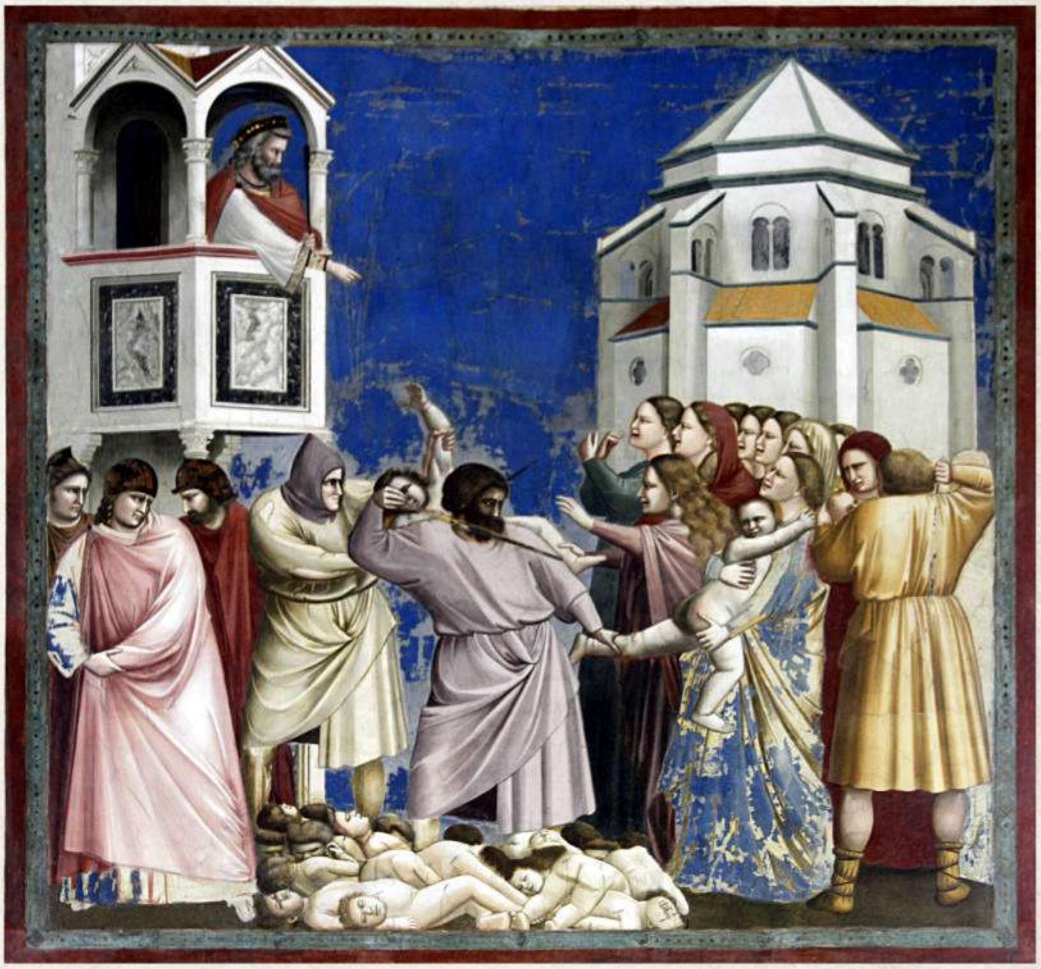


of the church had had just proclaimed himself head of. Boy Bishops have since been reinstated in several churches.

The topsy-turvy nature of the feast of the Holy Innocents is also reflected in traditions from Belgium. In the morning children would seize the keys to all the rooms in the house. When an adult entered a room the children would lock them in and demand a treat as the price of their release.

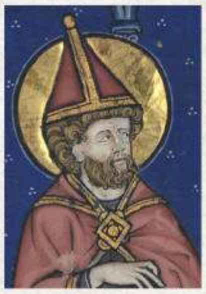
Several Catholic countries give children the sort of license that other countries grant on April Fools' Day. Pranks and tricks can be played with impunity since the tricksters themselves are considered innocent for the day.

In the town of Ibi in Alicante the feast of the Holy Innocents is a time of warfare - if only a playful form. Known as El Enfarinats - the floured ones - this event sees people dressed in mock uniforms pelting each other with bags of flour.



After the frivolity of Childermas comes the feast of St Thomas Becket, who was one of the most important saints in northern medieval Europe. Becket had been a close friend of King Henry II when the English king made him the Archbishop of Canterbury. Once in position, however, Becket refused to act as the king wanted. Legend has it that the king, in frustration, exclaimed "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?" Four of the king's knights heard this and rode to Canterbury. In an act that scandalised Christian Europe, the knights cut down Becket in the middle of his own cathedral.

Becket died in 1170 and by 1173 he had been declared a saint. His feast day was placed in Christmastide, such was his importance. Pilgrims began travelling to Canterbury and his shrine was one of the richest in England. Visitors could drink Becket Water, made by mixing water with his dried blood, in the hope of miraculous cures. Today his feast is only observed in churches and has little resonance with the public.



Defining moment

Saint Sylvester's Day, 31 December

Pope Sylvester I was the pope at the time of Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity in the 4th century. Sylvester died in 335 CE was buried on 31 December and so it was made his feast day. Traditions have long been associated with his day, such as the blessing of pigs in Vienna, and fortune telling with hot lead dripped in water. The change to the Gregorian calendar moved New Year's Day to 1 January which has led to St Sylvester's Day falling on the raucous celebrations of New Year's Eve.

Defining moment

Twelfth Night 5 January

As the last day of Christmastide, Twelfth Night has long been a time of revelry and feasting. In Tudor England Twelfth Night was one of the major dates in the calendar for parties and pageantry. Wassail, an alcoholic drink, was widely consumed and offered to guests who came to the door singing carols. Cakes feature heavily in Twelfth Night traditions. Those who find a bean or figurine in their slice were crowned as monarch of the festivities. As the last night of Christmastide it is sometimes considered unlucky to leave decorations up past this date.

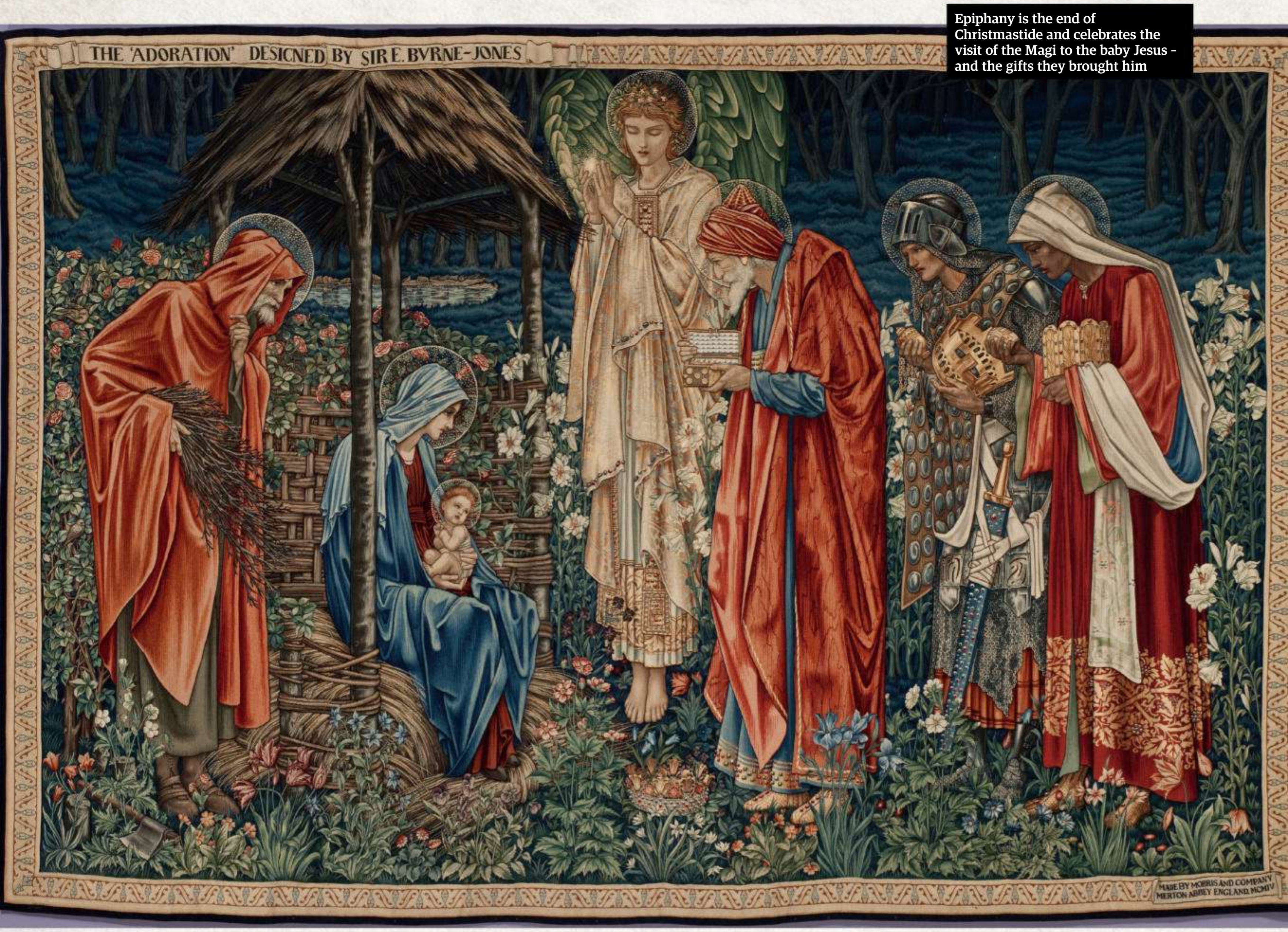
Sixth day of Christmastide
One of the few days of Christmastide not marked by a feast day, it is often used by churches to encourage a time of quiet reflection and prayer on the nature of the Christmas miracle.
30 December

Feast of the Circumcision
This feast marks the day Jesus was circumcised, but is also a feast in honour of the Virgin Mary in her role as mother of Jesus. It is also the day when Jesus is supposed to have been given his name.
1 January

St Basil's Day
St Basil was one of the most influential theologians of the early church, and Bishop of Caesarea in the 4th century. In Greek tradition Basil brings gifts to children on New Year's Eve.
2 January

Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus
This day commemorates the day Jesus was named. It is only celebrated by some Catholics, as Jesus' naming is also marked on the Feast of the Circumcision.
3 January

Feast of Elizabeth Ann Seton
Elizabeth Ann Seton was the first person born in the United States to be canonised by the Catholic church. She was known for setting up schools. She is the patron saint of widows.
4 January


THE 'ADORATION' DESIGNED BY SIR E. BVRNE-JONES
MADE BY MORRIS AND COMPANY MERTON ABBEY ENGLAND MCMIV

Epiphany is the end of Christmastide and celebrates the visit of the Magi to the baby Jesus - and the gifts they brought him

A Great Epiphany

The 12 days of Christmas come to a close with Epiphany, but not before many more celebrations have taken place

A mummer wearing a costume may visit your house expecting a drink on St Sylvester's Day in Switzerland

The 31st of December may be the biggest day – or rather, night – of partying on the planet. When the Gregorian calendar was introduced the start of the new year was moved to 1 January. The end of the old year is now marked with celebrations, fireworks, and revels to welcome in the fresh new year.

New Year's Eve is not one of the traditional days of Christmastide, however. In the Christian church the 31st is the feast day of St Sylvester. Sylvester became the Bishop of Rome at a crucial time for Christianity in 314 CE. His pontificate fell during the reign of Emperor Constantine I – the man who would make Christianity a legal religion throughout the Roman Empire. Many legends give Sylvester a direct role in converting Constantine to Christianity and winning the church many benefits from the emperor. One says that Sylvester cured the emperor of leprosy by administering baptismal water. For this, Constantine is said to have confirmed the Bishop of Rome as the most important position in the Catholic church.

The feast day of St Sylvester has traditions that are quite separate from New Year's Eve but often related to the coming year. In Germany and Austria predictions for the next year are made using Silvesterblei – Sylvester Lead. By pouring molten lead into water and interpreting the shapes that form, it is thought that the future can be divined. If the lead forms a star then luck will be yours. If the lead turns into a simple ball it means that your luck will roll away from you.

One Austrian expression of luck is to say you "have had a pig." Silvester, as New Year's Eve is known, will be stuffed with pigs made of marzipan. Those who actually have pigs may walk them on a lead through Vienna to get them blessed for the following year. Those without a pig can hang a model one from the ceiling to touch at midnight for luck. A few years ago people on Twitter adopted a similar New Year's Eve tradition of a pig made from citrus, tin foil and cloves, hashtagged #lemonpig.

In Switzerland children will attempt to wake up as early as possible on St Sylvester's Day because the last one to rise is mocked by the other children of the family. They may also be visited by a Silvesterkaus – a person dressed up as St Sylvester or some other character. Bands of these mummers roam the streets, stopping at houses and yodeling three times, and being rewarded with wine.

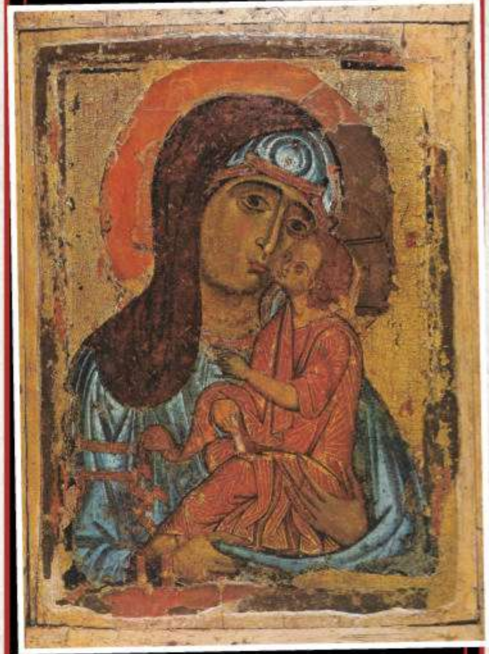
1 January is New Year's Day for most people. In several churches it is also the Feast of the Circumcision of Christ. According to Jewish tradition a male child is circumcised eight days after birth. This was important because it was the first time that Jesus' blood had been spilled and so confirmed his humanity. Several churches claimed to be in possession of the holy foreskin as a relic.

'When is Christmas?

The biblical accounts of the nativity give no firm date on which Jesus was born. No one can say exactly why 25 December was chosen as Jesus' birthday, but Sextus Julius Africanus, writing in the 3rd century, may have been influential. His history of the world suggested Mary became pregnant on 25 March exactly 5500 years after the creation of the world – implying a date of birth nine months later. The church in Rome began celebrating Christmas on the 25 December in 336 CE, and that has been the date most people use today, though some may disagree about when this date actually falls.

Most of the world uses the Gregorian calendar, but some churches use the older Julian system to plan their religious events. When the Gregorian calendar was introduced in 1582 it skipped ten days to correct for a drift of the date. Not every country accepted this change. Russia continued to use the Julian calendar until 1918. The Orthodox church in Russia still uses the Julian calendar to this day.

The difference between the calendars is slight but continues to grow. The Julian calendar is now 13 days behind the Gregorian. In the Orthodox church, the Coptic church, and the Ethiopian church, Christmas is now celebrated on 7 January in the Gregorian calendar.



Due to a difference between the Julian and Gregorian calendars used to calculate dates, not every church celebrates Christmas at the same time

In the Middle Ages in France the 1st was celebrated by clergy as the Feast of Fools. During the festivities the lower clergy would elect one of their own as a bishop or pope and they would lead the feast in a similar way to the Lord of Misrule. Because the revels smacked of blasphemy to the church authorities the practice was suppressed in most places in the 16th century.

5 January was once the culmination of the Christmastide season. Known as Twelfth Night it was once a major celebration. Special cakes were baked and alcoholic beverages were brewed. In Britain wassail, a hot spiced drink made from cider, would be shared. The spices of the drink recalled the gifts of the Magi. Often it was served from a wassail cup with many handles. After a few drinks the extra support might be necessary.

Cakes feature heavily in Twelfth Night traditions around the world. In Britain a cake would be baked that contained a dry bean and pea. The man who got a slice of the cake with a bean in it was crowned king of the feast, while the woman with the pea was the queen.

Twelfth Night is the end of the Christmas season for many. Decorations are taken down and put away for another year. But those seeking to bless their home chalk the year and the initials C+M+B on their door. The letters stand for Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar – the traditional names of the three wise men who visited the baby Jesus. They are appropriate to call on as their feast day occurs after Twelfth Night. The 6th of January is the Feast of the Epiphany that commemorates their visit.

In much of Europe the Epiphany is celebrated with some variety of King Cake. These cakes take several forms, from from the French galette, puff pastry stuffed with frangipane, to the ring-shaped sponges favoured in Spain and Portugal. Just like the Twelfth Night cake they have a surprise hidden inside; a small ceramic figurine of Jesus that has replaced the traditional bean. Whoever finds the baby Jesus, just as the biblical Magi did, is crowned the king. Finding the baby in your slice of cake is a sign of good luck to come.

The feast of Epiphany is commonly called Three Kings Day in many countries, in honour of the Magi. Small gifts are given in several places just as the Magi delivered presents to Jesus. In Mexico it is the Magi themselves who will leave their gifts in the shoes of children who have behaved well that year. In Italy they are delivered by a terrible old woman known as Befana, on a broomstick.

In Ireland 6 January is known as Women's Little Christmas. Women get to put their feet up and celebrate with their friends while men take over the housework for the day. And after all the religious and celebratory exertions of Christmastide, who can blame them for having a rest?

And Call Off Christmas!

How the puritans decided Christmas was both popish and pagan

Written by Edoardo Albert

Puritans, strict Protestant Christians, did not like to see other people having fun. Christmas was an occasion for drinking and dancing and, what was worse, it was Catholic too. In Scotland, the puritan Kirk (church) founded by John Knox banned the public celebration of Christmas in 1561, although court records indicate that not all the Scots complied with the ban. When James VI was crowned in 1567 he rescinded it. James became king of England too in 1603 and his son and heir, Charles I, elaborated the royal celebrations of Christmas, presenting baroque, extravagant masques.

Charles' political opponents, the puritans, already disliked Christmas, so the king's espousal of it exacerbated their antipathy to the festival. Puritan scholars, having already condemned Christmas as Catholic, decided it was pagan as well, ascribing such customs as putting up greenery to pagan impiety. In fact, most of the present-day notions about Christmas really being a pagan festival derive from the puritan attacks on traditional celebrations.

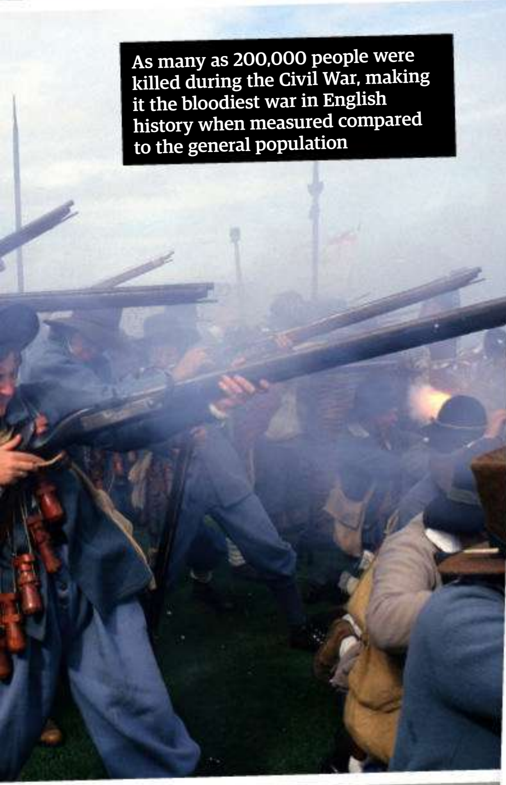
One result of the Civil Wars in England, Scotland and Ireland between 1639 and 1653 was that Christmas was banned again. First in Scotland, in 1640, when the Scots defeated an army led by the future Charles II, then in England in 1644. Curiously, the banning of Christmas in England was the result both of the defeat of the Royalist forces by the Parliamentarians and also previous politicking. The Scots' price for supporting the English Parliamentarians was further reformation of the Church of England. As part of that reform, the English Parliament passed a law requiring that the last Wednesday of the month be a day of fasting and penance. In 1644, Christmas fell on a Wednesday and Christmas was cancelled.

Christmas was permanently cancelled in 1647 when Parliament passed An Ordinance for Abolishing of Festivals. However, in its determination to expunge Christmas, Parliament required shops, inns and taverns to stay open on 25 December, which led to more people drinking and merrymaking than would have been the case if everyone had stayed at home.

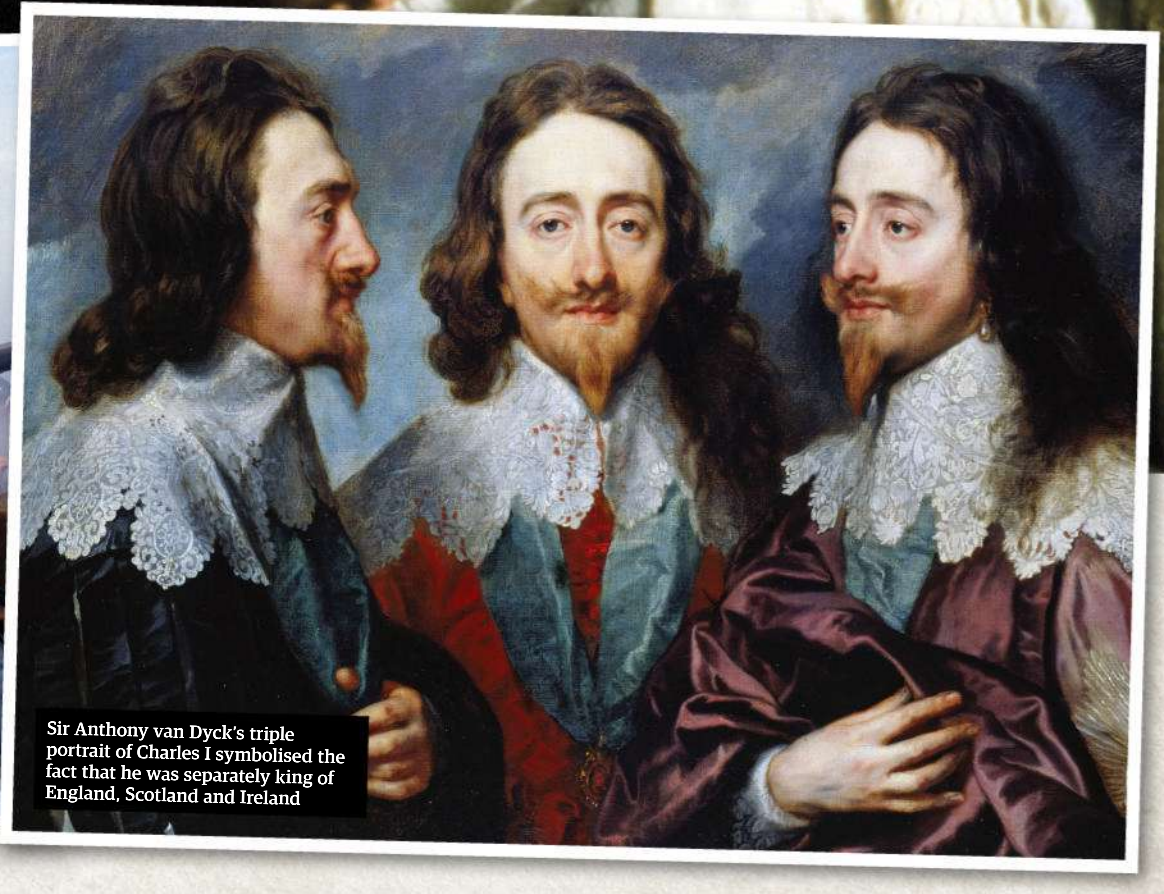
The Restoration in 1660 saw a king back on the throne and Christmas back in the calendar. The Scots continued to view Christmas with suspicion though, and only declared it a bank holiday in 1958.

In America, the new colonies adopted different attitudes to Christmas: Virginia celebrated it while puritan New England suppressed it, with Massachusetts outlawing its celebration in 1651. Although the law was repealed in 1681, Americans remained ambivalent about celebrating Christmas into the 19th century. Congress met on Christmas Day up until 1850, while the first state to declare Christmas a holiday was Alabama in 1836. However, alongside the descendants of the puritans in America there were others, hailing from other parts of Europe, and their Christmas customs slowly began to seep into wider American culture with the results we see today.

In *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* Alan Rickman's Sheriff of Nottingham orders his men to 'Call off Christmas!' In reality, medieval people were perfectly happy with celebrating festivals



As many as 200,000 people were killed during the Civil War, making it the bloodiest war in English history when measured compared to the general population



Sir Anthony van Dyck's triple portrait of Charles I symbolised the fact that he was separately king of England, Scotland and Ireland

How Dickens Made a Modern Christmas

The festive season would not be the same without the influence of one of Britain's most famous authors

Written by Jessica Leggett

It can be argued that Christmas would not be the way it is today without Charles Dickens, one of the greatest authors of the Victorian era. In fact, Dickens is so entwined with the holiday that he is often credited as being 'the man who invented Christmas'. Of course, this is an exaggeration and Dickens did not invent Christmas as we know it. However, the vision of Christmas and the ideas that he put forth in his novels have continued to persevere to this day, contributing to the many traditions and expectations that we have for the holiday season.

Believe it or not, Christmas was a rarely celebrated holiday in Britain at the start of the 19th century. The beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the mid-18th century led to a huge increase in urbanisation, as workers left their rural communities and homes to move to cities to work in the factories and so on. An increasingly urban population in Britain meant that many workers were labouring away in the factories, instead of being at home to celebrate Christmas. Therefore, Christmas Day for most people was treated like another average work day.

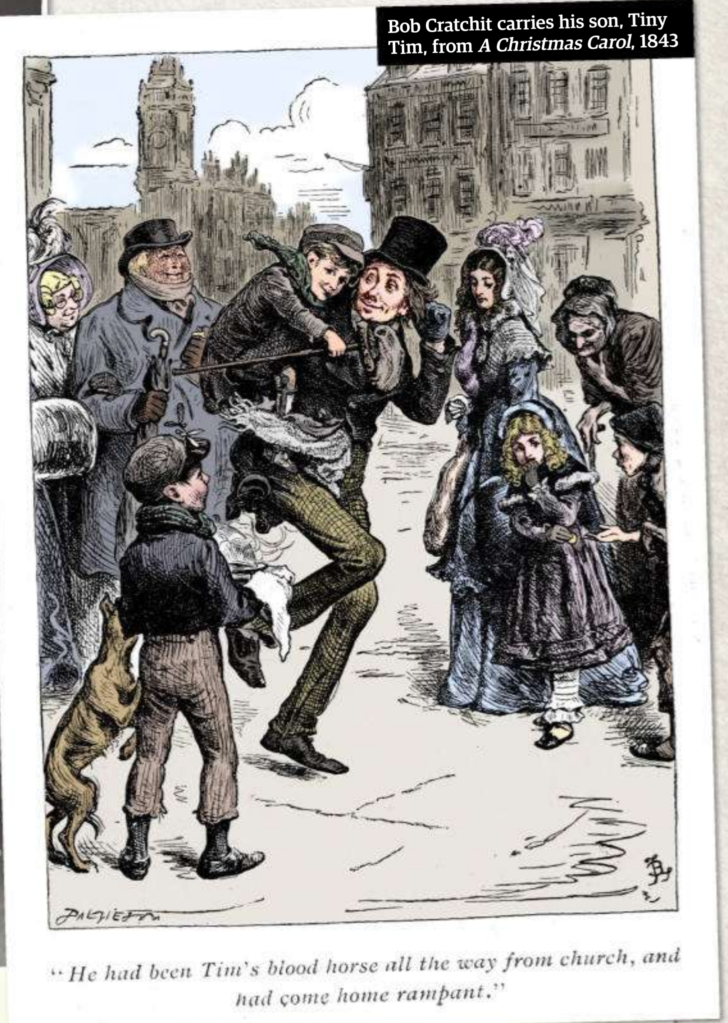
However, this slowly began to change during the Victorian era, partly helped by Queen Victoria herself. Images of the queen, her husband Prince Albert and their children enjoying Christmas together, whether they were sitting around their Christmas tree or eating dinner together, spread across the country and influenced others to do the same. Christmas increasingly became a time for family to gather together with new traditions, such as the Christmas card and Christmas tree, emerging and shaping Christmas into one of the biggest holidays of the year.

So, where is Dickens' place in all of this? In truth, his novels were published at a time when Christmas was already experiencing a revival during this period, with old traditions being brought back while new ones, like the ones just mentioned, were created. While he was not solely responsible for the renewed interest in Christmas, Dickens' writings definitely helped to boost interest in the festive season, building on a craze that had already been brewing.

In his many novels, Dickens encouraged the message that Christmas was a time for family, love, peace and goodwill, rather than for wealth and materialism. Of course, this message is most evident in what is arguably Dickens' most popular and beloved work, *A Christmas Carol*.

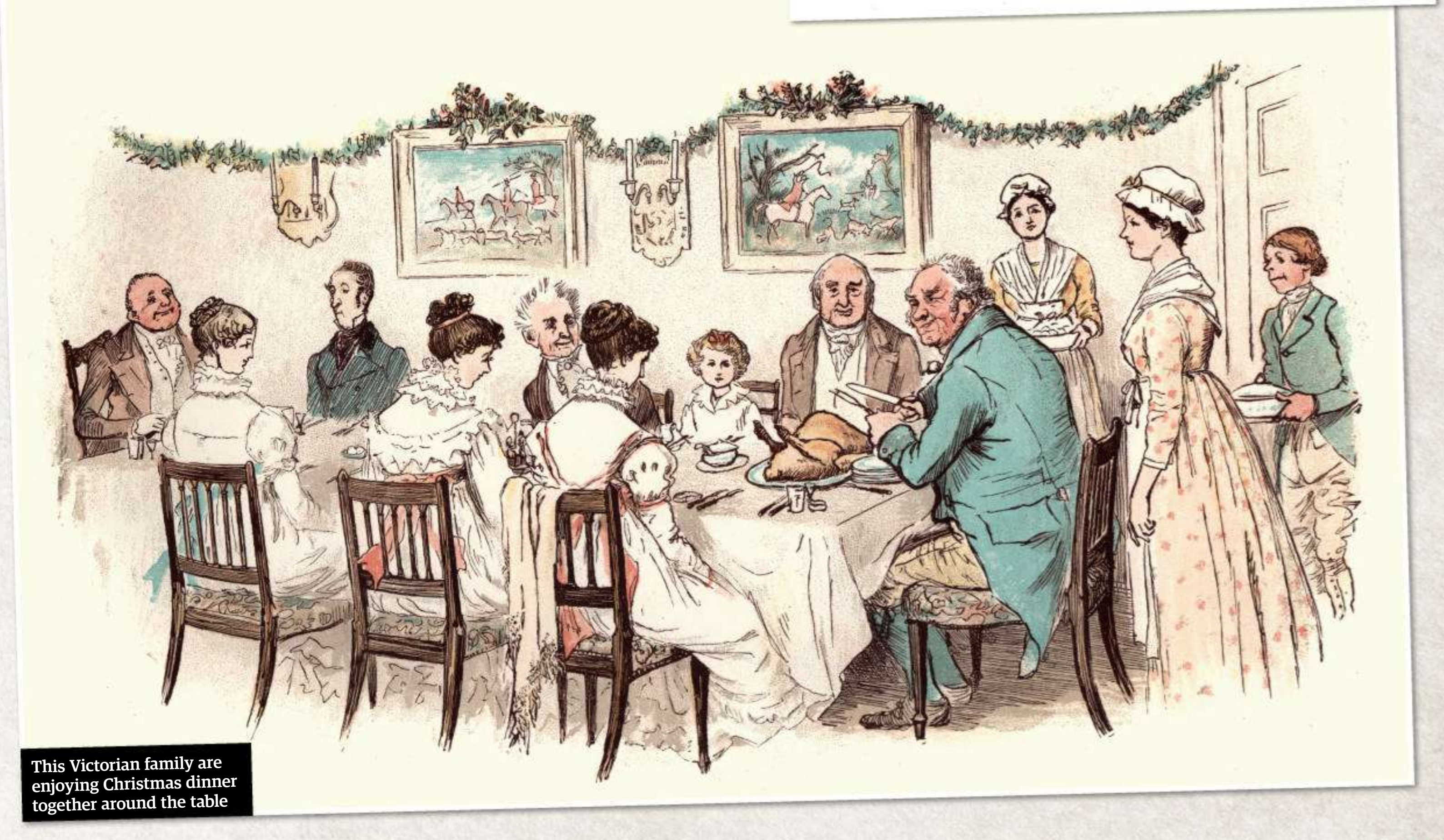
Published in 1843, *A Christmas Carol* is a novella that follows Ebenezer Scrooge, an elderly, greedy and selfish miser who is mean to those around him, refuses to give to charity, and hates Christmas. Scrooge goes on a journey of redemption after being visited by the ghost of Jacob Marley, his old business partner, and the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Yet to Come. Shown the error of his ways and the fate that he faces should he continue down his current path, Scrooge wakes up on Christmas Day a changed man, who wants to be kind and generous. Embracing his newfound

Renowned author Charles Dickens helped to shape Christmas into the holiday we know today



Bob Cratchit carries his son, Tiny Tim, from *A Christmas Carol*, 1843

"*He had been Tim's blood horse all the way from church, and had come home rampant.*"

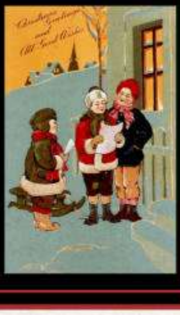


This Victorian family are enjoying Christmas dinner together around the table

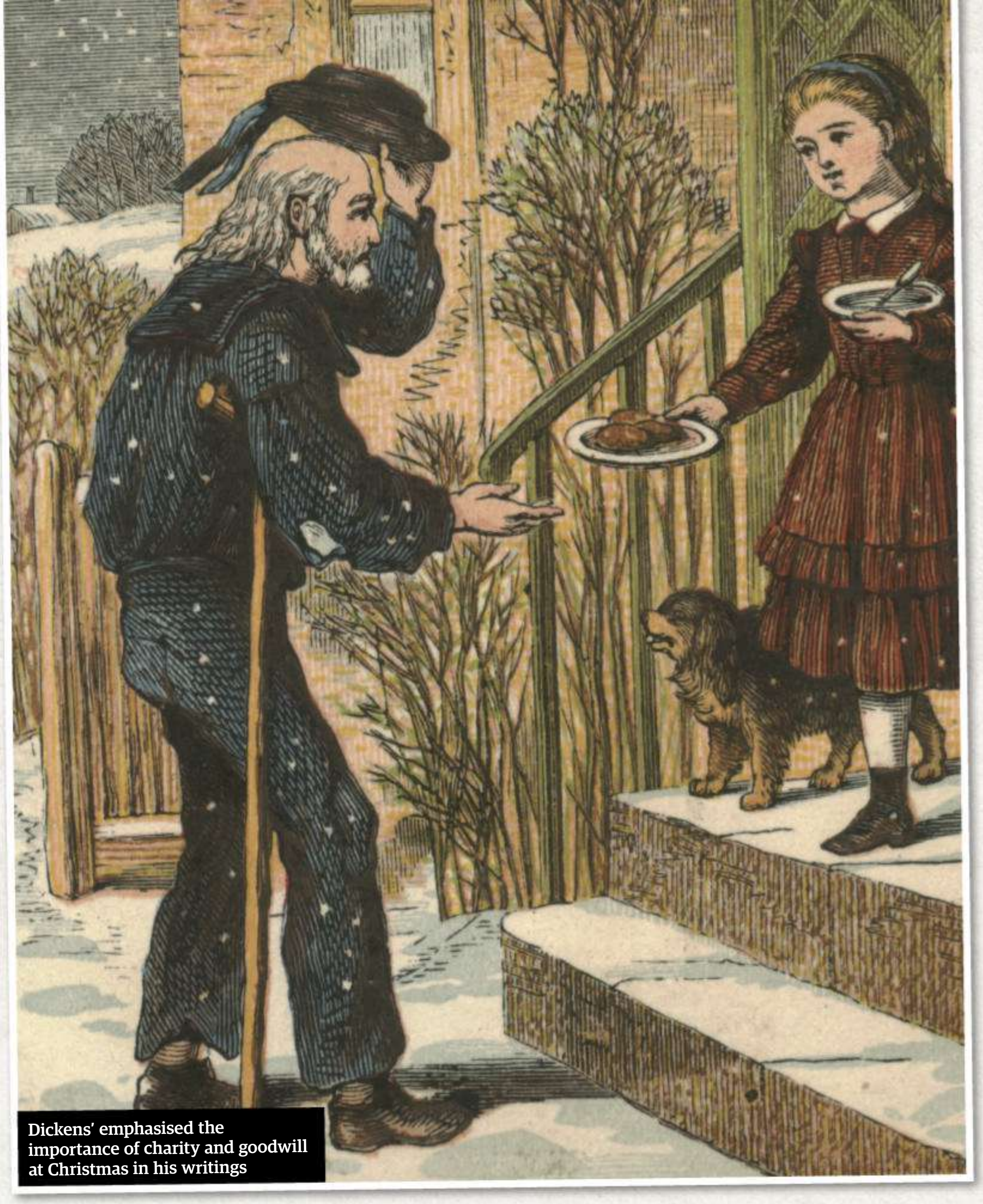
Reviving Christmas

Christmas may have been a bawdy celebration of merrymaking and joy during the Tudor era, but ultimately many of the pastimes were neglected following the Reformation and the crackdown placed on Christmas during the rule of the Puritans in the 17th century. The 'excesses' of Christmas, such as gambling, dancing and masques, were criticised and there were calls for them to be curbed—although it should be noted that these calls were also made before the Protectorate came to power in England.

When Christmas was subsequently banned in England in 1647, replaced with a day of fasting, many people continued to celebrate in private. However, the ban still affected many Christmas traditions that would not return properly until the Victorian era. This includes traditions such as carol singing; decorating the home with evergreens; the Christmas feast; games and entertainment—most notably the pantomime, which often opened on Christmas Day and has been compared to the festive performances held during the Tudor period. While the Victorians revived many of these traditions, they also re-invented some of them, for example decorating their home with evergreen Christmas trees, which suited their tastes more.



A Victorian Christmas card, depicting children carol singing together



Dickens' emphasised the importance of charity and goodwill at Christmas in his writings

Christmas spirit, Scrooge corrects his previous errors by donating to charity, sending a turkey to his employee, Bob Cratchit, and his family for their Christmas dinner, and taking up his nephew's invitation to spend Christmas with his family.

Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* after reading an 1843 parliamentary report on child labour in the factories, and the appalling conditions that they worked in. Although it is a festive tale, *A Christmas Carol* is ultimately a story that Dickens wrote to draw attention to the conditions suffered by the poor and disadvantaged in society and to voice his views on social reform. This was an issue close to his heart as Dickens had experienced poverty himself as a child.

Emphasising the need to forget material wealth and embrace charity at Christmas, Dickens' novella struck a chord with a Victorian society that was focused on morality, charity, religion and respect - even if there were many contradictions with how it appeared outwardly, compared to how it behaved. Nevertheless, *A Christmas Carol* was a hit and along with Dickens' message on morality, it also helped to spread many of the Christmas traditions that we know today, as well as what a 'traditional' Victorian Christmas was supposed to look like.

> The ideal of a white Christmas is rooted in the cold weather of Victorian Britain's Little Ice Age climate event

Some of the Christmas traditions that are featured in *A Christmas Carol* include singing Christmas carols, Christmas trees, spending time with loved ones over a delicious feast, and giving and receiving Christmas cards and gifts. It is also said that the introduction of paid leave for Christmas, something that Scrooge denies Cratchit before his night with the Christmas Ghosts, was influenced by the novella.

It is also thanks to Dickens and *A Christmas Carol* that we wish for a white Christmas every year and associate snow with the festive season—even though, in the UK at least, it is more typical to experience snow between January and March, rather than in December. Born in 1812, Dickens grew up in one of the coldest decades in British history, experiencing exceptionally cold winters, in a period often referred to as the 'Little Ice Age', which ended in 1850. In fact, it was so cold in February 1814 that the River Thames froze and London held its last frost fair, an iconic winter event which had been held infrequently since the 7th century. It is thought that the freezing winters of his childhood inspired Dickens to create an idyllic white Christmas in his novella.

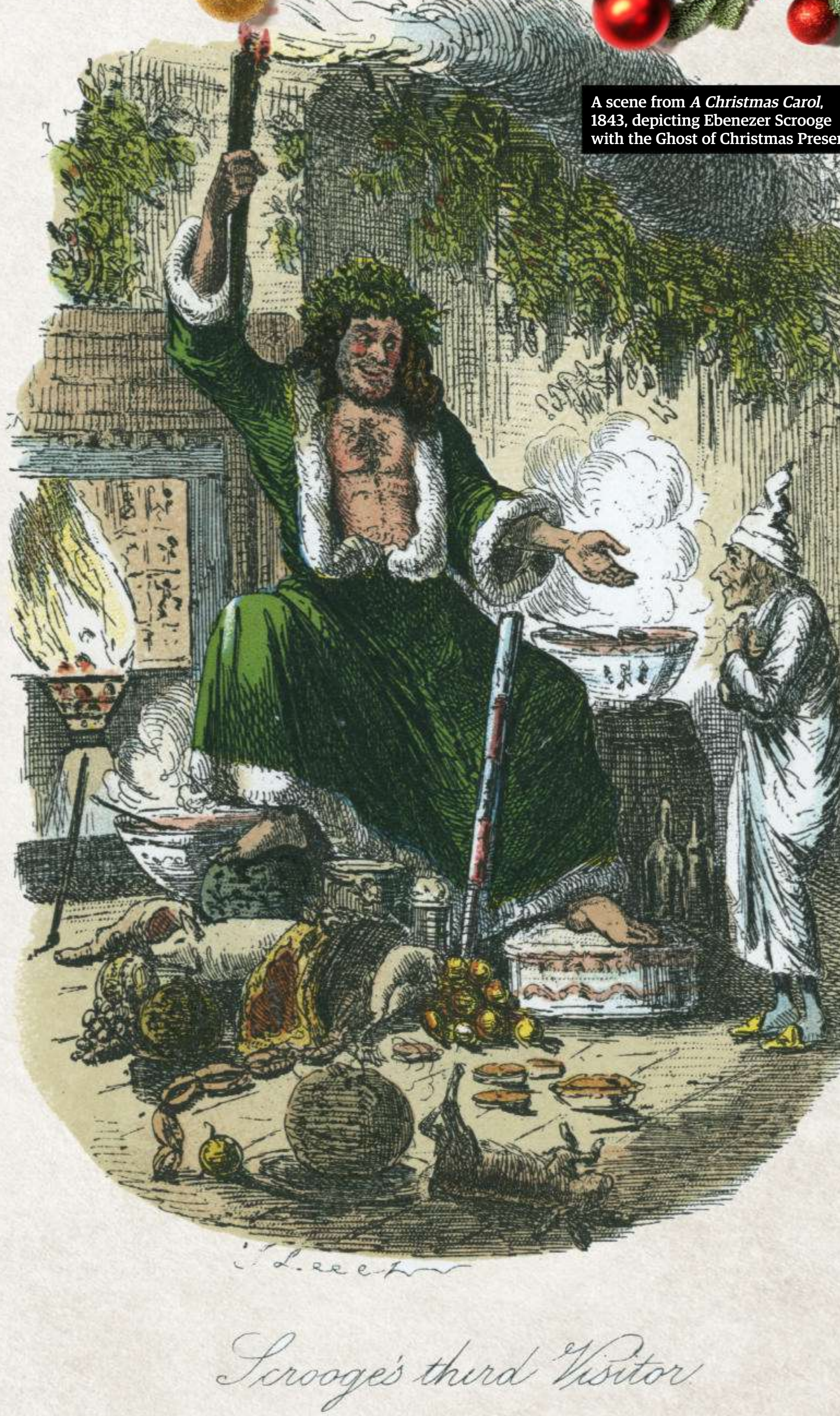
Dickens' influence on the modern Christmas even extends to the vocabulary that we still use during the festive season today. The terms 'Merry Christmas' and 'Bah! Humbug' were not widely used until Dickens included them in *A Christmas Carol*, and the novella helped to popularise these sayings amongst the Victorians. As for Ebenezer Scrooge, the character became so iconic that the term 'Scrooge' is still used today to describe those who refuse to join in on the Christmas spirit.

Speaking of the Christmas spirit, this attitude of togetherness, merriment and giving is another aspect of Christmas that we have to thank Dickens for. His influence helped to revive Christmas traditions that had been long neglected, as well as emphasise that the festive season is a time for generosity. Also, the illustration for the Ghost of Christmas Present in *A Christmas Carol* was based on Victorian images of Father Christmas, who is, of course, a personification of the Christmas spirit, with his joy and gift-giving.

Although *A Christmas Carol* is Dickens' most famous festive story, it was actually the first in a series of five Christmas books that he wrote. His four other Christmas novels were *The Chimes*, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, *The Battle of Life* and *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain*, which Dickens published following the success of A Christmas Carol. Although none of them reached the same popularity as *A Christmas Carol*, these novels continued to perpetuate the messages and traditions that Dickens had included in his novella.

When Dickens began his public readings in 1853, *A Christmas Carol* was the first book he chose, and he also read from the other four books during his reading tours across Britain and the United States, where his work was also popular. Together, these five novels helped to revive the idea of a family Christmas—both in Britain and the United States—and cement the traditions and ideas that have become associated with the 'perfect' Christmas today. Dickens' final public reading in March 1870, three months before he died, was also from *A Christmas Carol*.

While Dickens certainly did not invent the modern Christmas as it is so often claimed, his work most definitely contributed to both the revival of Christmas celebrations and the traditions that have become so synonymous with the festive holiday today. The core message of his stories, that you do not need wealth, like Ebenezer Scrooge, or consumerism to enjoy Christmas, but rather family and love, like the Cratchit family, is one that still resonates with us all today.



A scene from *A Christmas Carol*, 1843, depicting Ebenezer Scrooge with the Ghost of Christmas Present

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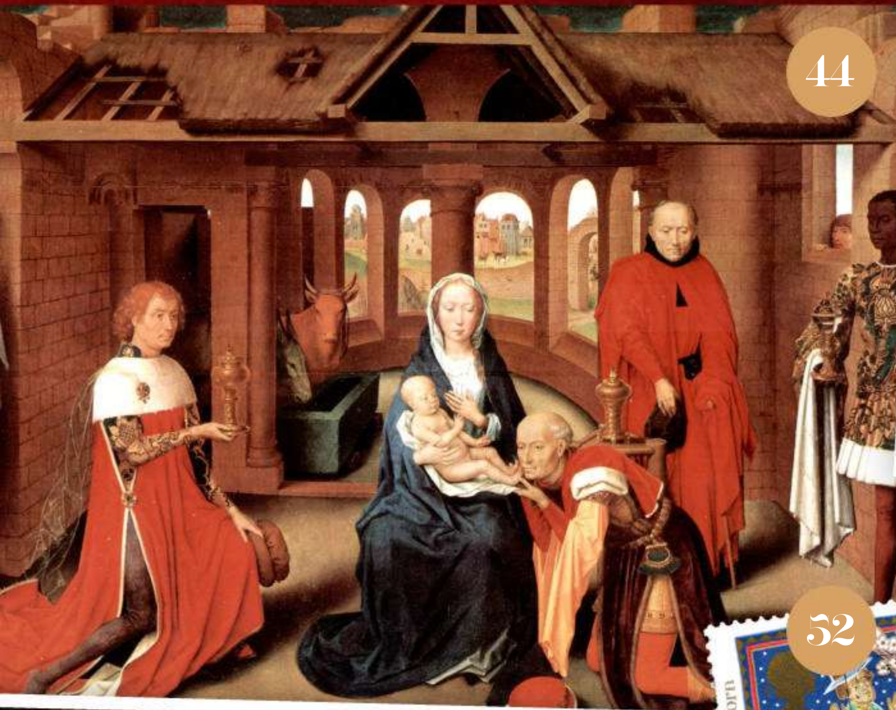
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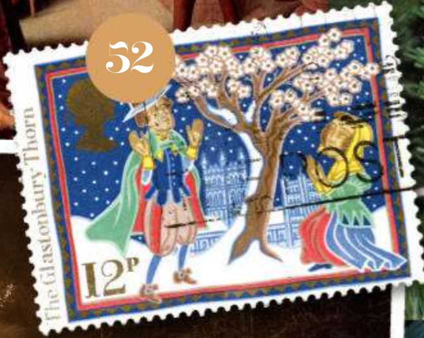
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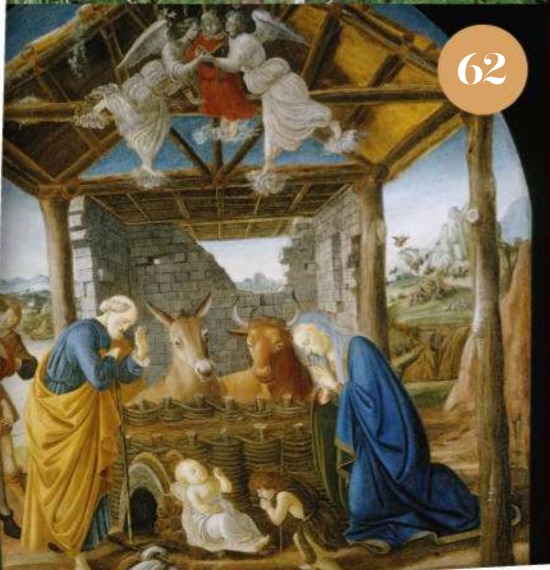
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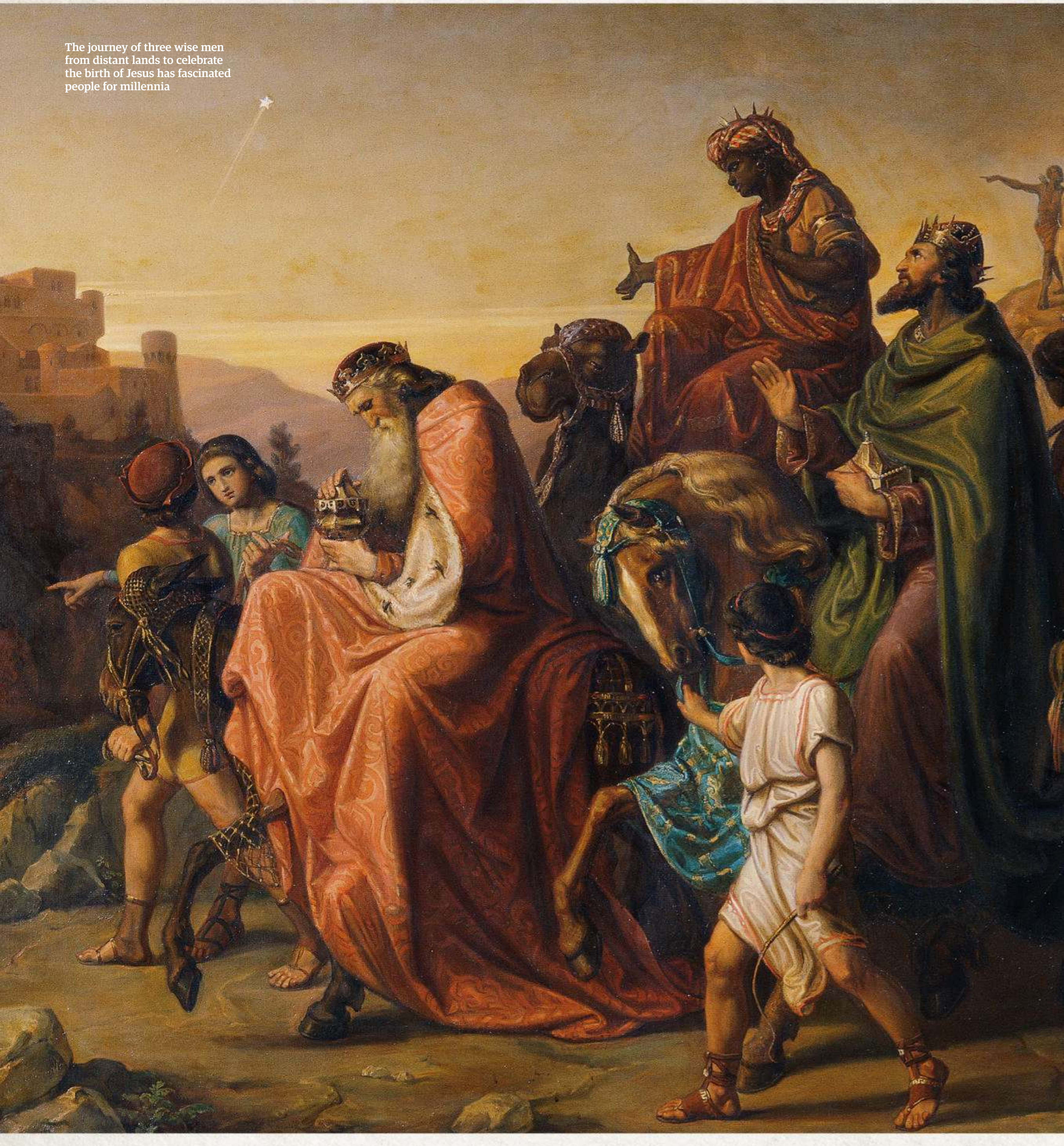


The journey of three wise men from distant lands to celebrate the birth of Jesus has fascinated people for millennia

The Three Kings

The three 'kings' of the nativity are instantly recognisable, but who were they? Where did they come from? Where did they go?

Written by Ben Gazur

In almost every depiction of the nativity you will find that there are three figures kneeling before the baby Jesus. These three men are often richly dressed in flowing and exotic robes. As they kneel they offer up gifts to the infant Messiah. Everyone knows that they came to give gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and everyone thinks they know who they are. So who were the three kings? Or is it wise men? Or are they Magi? The tale of these visitors takes in theology, folklore, and art history.

The biblical account

The Gospel of Matthew puts great emphasis on the genealogy of Jesus but provides scant few details of his birth. You must look to the other gospels for shepherds, little donkeys, and mangers. Yet Matthew does include a strange story of visitors from the east.

We are told that wise men, 'Magoi' in the original Greek, travelled from 'the east' having observed a star that predicted the birth of the king of the Jews. They arrive in Jerusalem and meet King Herod to ask where they might find the newborn king. Herod is not keen on a potential rival to his throne and so sends them on with instructions to inform him if they ever discover this new king. The star that the wise men are following 'stops' over the place where Jesus is. They visit Jesus in a house and kneel before him. They open a chest and give their three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then a dream warns them not to return to Herod so they set off for their homes.

This is the entirety of the story of the wise men as given in the Bible. Note that there is no mention of them kneeling in a stable, only in a house. There is also no number given to the wise men. The Greek is plural so there must be more than one of them, but beyond that it is impossible to say how many there were. So who were these mysterious, unnamed, and numberless visitors?

Behind the nativity scenes

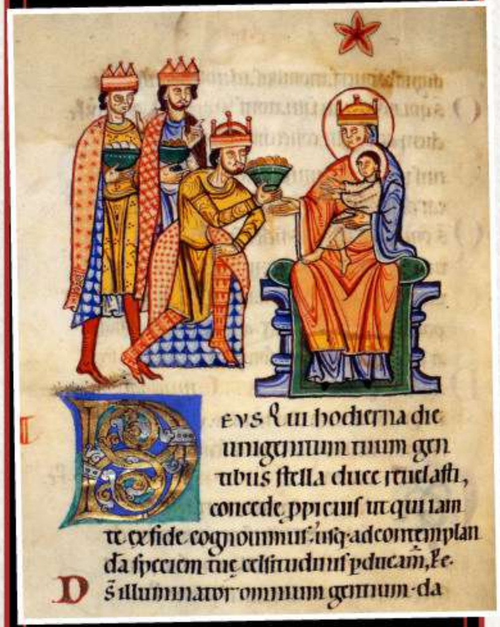
When the author of the Gospel of Matthew referred to Magoi what exactly did he mean? The word is often rendered 'wise men' in English but scholars have been able to probe deeply into its history. The Magoi, as the Greeks called them, or Magi in Latin, were a priestly caste in the Persian empire that served in the Zoroastrian religion. They are described in detail in the works of writers like Herodotus and Xenophon.

The Three Gifts

Every child knows that the three kings brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the baby Jesus, but fewer will be able to tell you exactly why these gifts were chosen. What exactly is the meaning of these specific objects? The Book of Isaiah that suggests kings will come to worship the Messiah also says they will bring gold and incense.

Early church thinkers believed that the gifts of the Magi had special significance. In the 3rd century Origen described the gifts as: gold worthy of a king, myrrh for a mortal, and frankincense for a god. The symbolism of gold is still obvious but the other two may need explanation. In ancient religions the gods were often thought to enjoy the smells of sacrifice and burning. Costly fragrances like frankincense were burned in honour of deities. Myrrh was used to anoint the bodies of the dead and so prefigured Jesus' death on the cross. Taken together the gifts cover the various aspects of Jesus' status.

The Bible does not record what happened to the gifts of the Magi. Some traditions say the gold was spent to support the holy family's flight to Egypt. Others say the myrrh was used to prepare Jesus' corpse for burial after the crucifixion. Those who wish to see the gifts for themselves may visit Mount Athos in Greece, where they are supposedly housed in a gold and silver reliquary.



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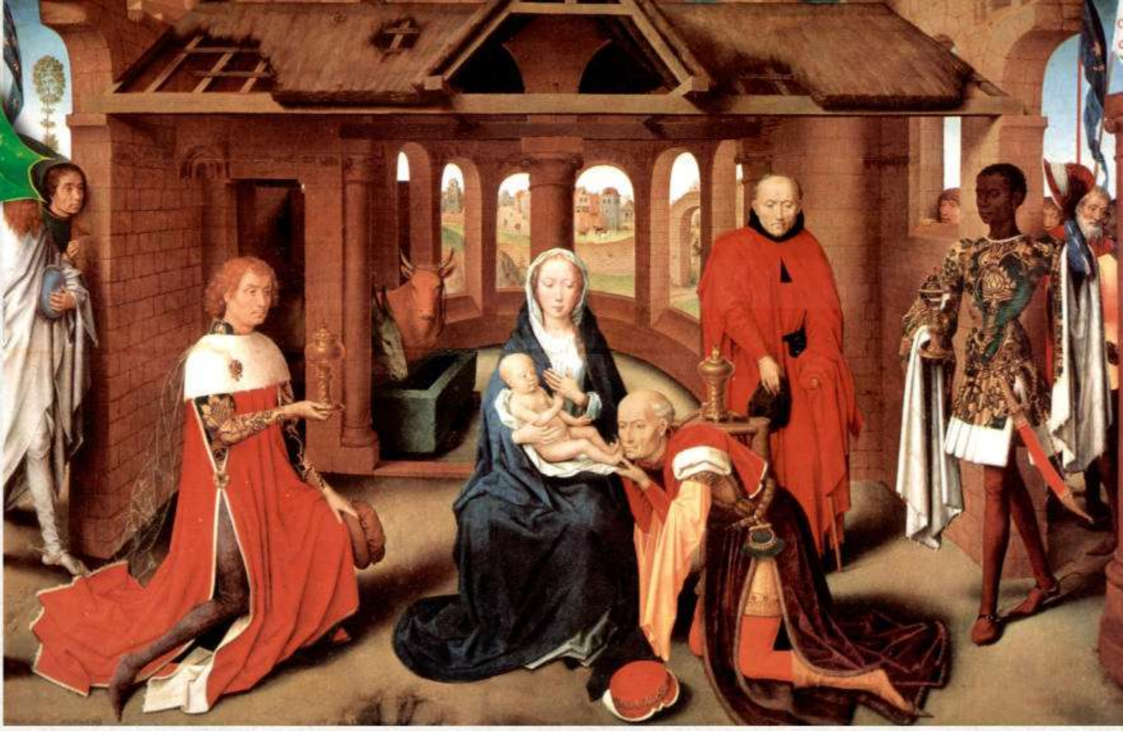
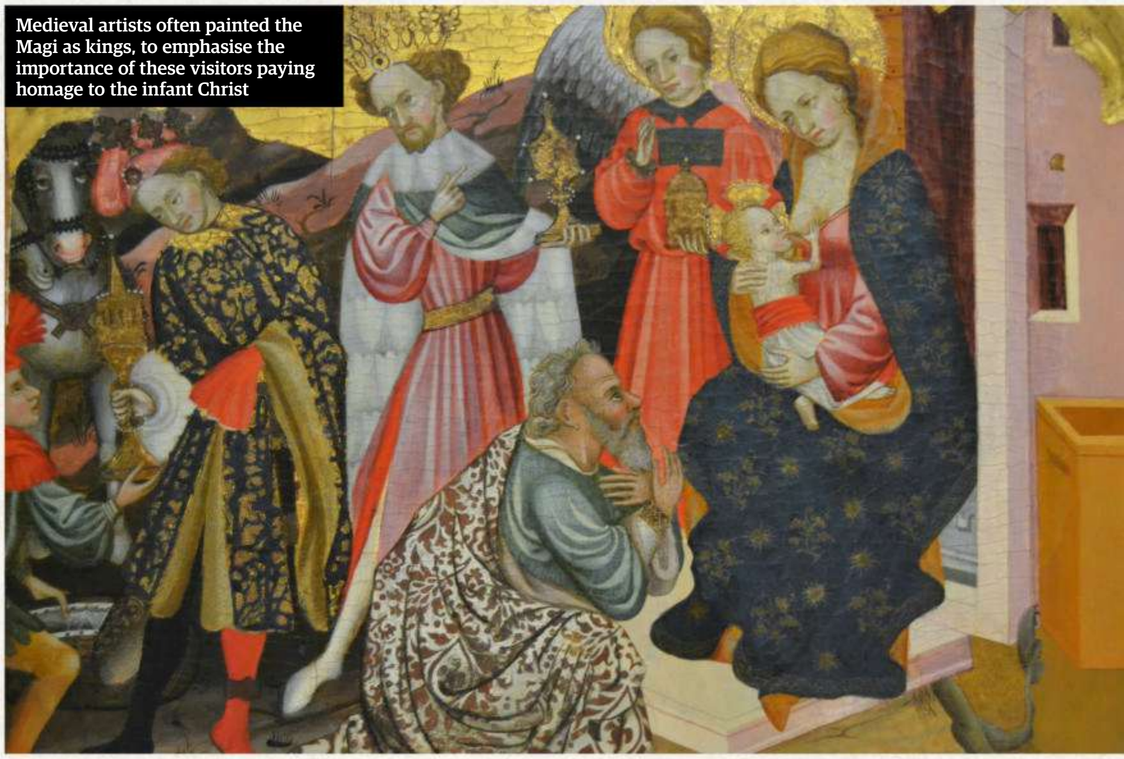
The gifts of the Magi have been central to images of the nativity since the earliest centuries of Christian iconography





Medieval artists often painted the Magi as kings, to emphasise the importance of these visitors paying homage to the infant Christ

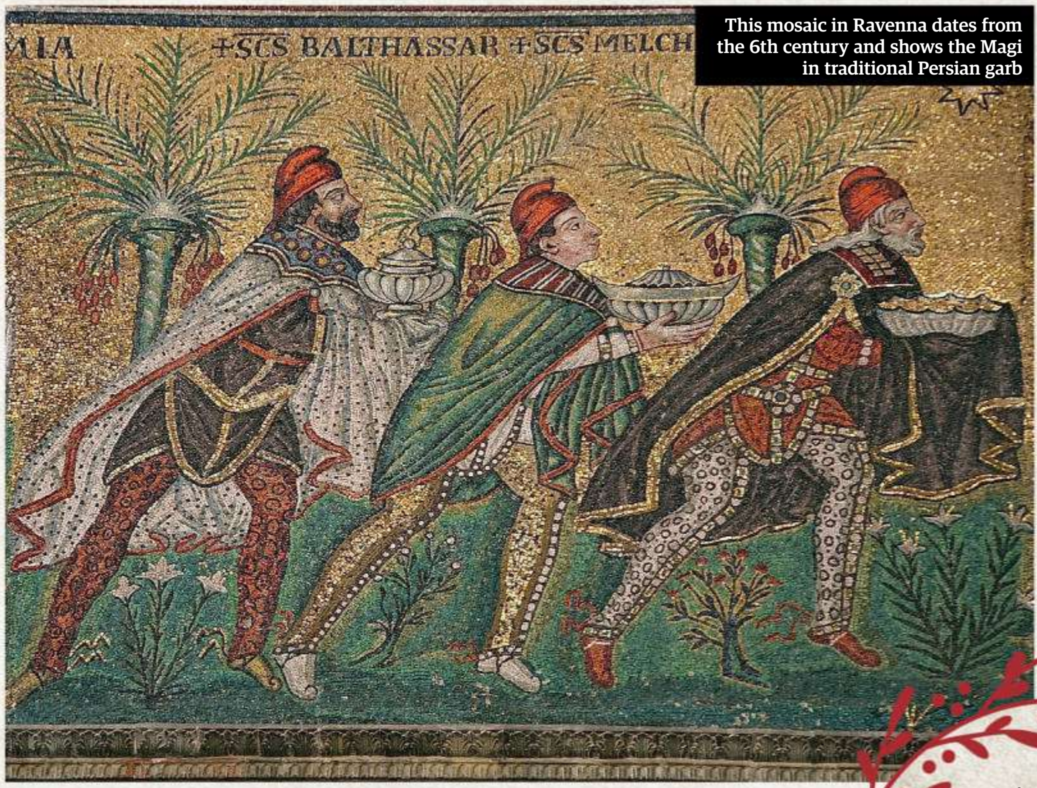
The Magi in their accounts were advisers to the king and responsible for interpreting the will of heaven. This involved close study of the heavens to allow for the casting of horoscopes for the royal court. That such people would be the ones to spot the motions of a star heralding the birth of a king makes sense in this regard.

The Jewish people had long had dealings with the Magi both during their exile in Babylon and afterwards. The Talmud contains many stories of Jewish people decrying the rites that were carried out by the Magi where they conflicted with rituals the Jews held sacred.

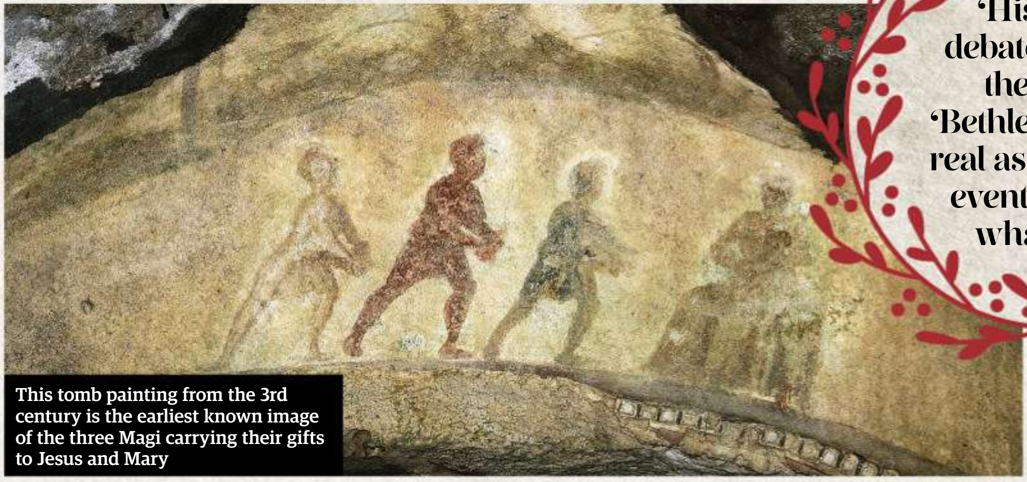
That the wise men are sometimes called kings in later tradition is a syncretisation between the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. The prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament says that "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." By making the wise men kings from distant lands this prophecy appears to have come true. The link between the wise men and Isaiah's prophecies is explicit in the gifts which they bring. Isaiah says they "will come bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord."

We three kings

Almost as soon as converts were won to Christianity from among non-Jewish people the importance of the wise men was emphasised in art and theology. The catacombs of the early Christians found underneath Rome contain multiple images of the wise men coming to give adoration to the young Jesus. The adoration of the Magi had a special meaning to these Christians. They represented the first non-Jewish – gentile – people who recognised Jesus as the Messiah. The question



This mosaic in Ravenna dates from the 6th century and shows the Magi in traditional Persian garb



This tomb painting from the 3rd century is the earliest known image of the three Magi carrying their gifts to Jesus and Mary

of whether non-Jewish people could become Christians had been a fraught matter in the early church. The Magi set a precedent for this.

In the earliest images the convention of having three wise men, one for each gift, is not always followed. One tomb image depicts four men and another just two. Some documents from Syria suggest there were actually 12 wise men. In many carvings and mosaics the wise men are shown in typically Persian dress to underline and emphasise their foreign nature.

The idea of the wise men being kings is an ancient one. When the relics of the Magi were recovered from Persia by the Eastern Roman Emperor Zeno in the 5th century he described them as the remains of the kings. An apocryphal text known as the Armenian Infancy Gospel that dates from around 500 CE gives the names of the wise men as Melkon the King of Persia, Gaspar the King of India, and Baldassar the King of Arabia. In the Latin west the names of the kings were more commonly given as the names we know today: Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar.

Later travels

Possibly because the biblical account of the wise men is so scanty many traditions have sprung up around their lives before and after the adoration. St Bede, writing in the 8th century, described the three Magi in the following way "The first is said to have been Melchior, an old man with white hair and a long beard... The second, Caspar by name, young and beardless and ruddy complexioned... The third, black-skinned and heavily bearded, named Balthasar..." By describing the Magi as of various ages Bede implies that they came to represent all people, not merely the young or old. The tradition that the three Magi represented Persia, India, and Arabia also suggests that the entire world was represented at the adoration.

The representation of Balthasar as Black in European art began in the 12th century but only became conventional in northern Europe from the 14th century. The inclusion of African people in Renaissance art became more common as European nations expanded their empires. At first glance the representation of a wise king as Black may seem positive, but in much art of the period Blackness was sometimes only used as a shorthand for exotic and strange. In some modern Spanish parades Balthazar is played by a white person in blackface, though this tradition is controversial.

The biblical account of the wise men ends with them journeying home by another road to avoid King Herod. The Greek text of Matthew suggests they are returning to a singular country, as if they all call the same place home.

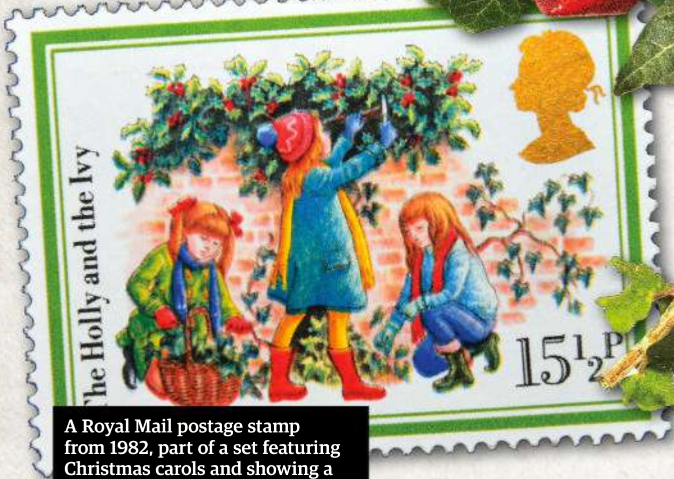
Today all three wise men are regarded as saints by various churches. They either converted at once on meeting the baby Jesus or later encountered one of his apostles. Some late texts suggest they suffered martyrdom for their new faith.

> Historians debate whether the Star of Bethlehem was a real astronomical event and if so, what it was

The 14th century writer John of Hidlesheim described how the holy relics of the wise men came to reside in Cologne. He described St Helen, a voracious relic-hunter and mother of Constantine, recovering their bodies and taking them to Constantinople. They were later moved to Milan, and from there to Cologne by Frederick Barbarossa, Holy Roman Emperor. Marco Polo, however, claimed to have visited the tomb of the Magi during his travels in what's now modern-day Iran.

The feast of the three kings is celebrated today on Epiphany – 6 January. In some places gifts are given to children on this day instead of Christmas to commemorate the coming of the wise men. In Central Europe, Catholic families will chalk the initials of the Magi above their door to bring their blessings onto their home. Traditional cakes are sometimes served on Epiphany that include figurines of the wise men or the baby Jesus. Whoever gets the little statue in their slice is crowned the king of the season.

From just a very few lines in a single book of the Bible the wise men have come to play a very large part in traditions surrounding the nativity.


The Holly and the Ivy
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A Royal Mail postage stamp from 1982, part of a set featuring Christmas carols and showing a group of girls decorating with the evergreen plants for Christmas

A traditional Christmas wreath made with holly, ivy, conifer, fir cones and red ribbons

Holly and Ivy

We drape them around our fireplace, form them into wreaths, decorate our tables with them – there's even a Christmas carol devoted to the two plants

Written by Alice Pattillo

The roots of holly and ivy's relationship to the winter solstice likely lie, like so much else regarding the Christmas season, with the ancients. Evergreen plants like holly and ivy were the only plants still thriving during the winter period in Christianity's adopted home in northern Europe and were brought indoors as they were said to bring luck and assure the return of spring, renewal and rebirth. Both have a strong folkloric relationship to rebirth and old pagan superstitions and myths of the fae or fair folk that prevailed despite the advent of Christianity. One old folk fertility ritual supposedly has a girl dress in ivy and a boy in holly and parade around the village in order to usher in the spring.

Medieval Christian lore associates the red berries and sharp prickly leaves of the hollybush with the crown of thorns worn by Christ upon his death, and the blood that resulted from his crucifixion. Christ himself was reborn in spring, and both holly and ivy are associated with the resurrection of nature at this time. However, this does not explain why holly is linked with Christmas and not Easter – but perhaps folklore can. Due to its canopy-like structure and sharp exterior, the holly bush is thought of as a protective plant, resisting lightning strikes, shielding livestock and other plant saplings – particularly those of the oak tree, its so-called twin. While the oak would rule the lighter months, holly would come into its own while the oak tree slept. The druids are said to have worn it in their hair to trap evil spirits, and Celtic chieftains would wear a wreath of the evergreen upon their heads. People would bring it into their homes during the most feared season of the year in order to fend off the troublesome entities unleashed at the start of winter. Holly was also life-giving during the harsh winter, as the leaves could be made into medicine to treat colds. In Wales, fresh sprigs of holly would be used to beat girls out of bed on the day after Christmas, supposedly for luck.

Ivy has a similar dual nature to holly. To the Greeks it symbolised immortality and was sacred to the god of wine, Dionysus. Its leaves produce a narcotic effect and were chewed by the female followers of the god, the maenads, to reach a frenzied state. Some classical historians think Dionysus influenced aspects of Jesus' iconography. It is a highly resilient plant, often destroying whatever it clings to. Ivy is also heavily associated with love and death and is often found in graveyards, engulfing old tombstones. English folklore says that a grave without ivy meant the soul of the dead was restless. A young woman's grave swathed in ivy meant a broken heart was surely her cause of death. Bringing ivy into the home is said to be unlucky, unless at Christmas – so long as you remove it before Candlemas. While holly will trap evil spirits, ivy inside the house during December will offer shelter to the fair folk of British lore, who cannot cause harm during this holiest of months, and you will win their favour.

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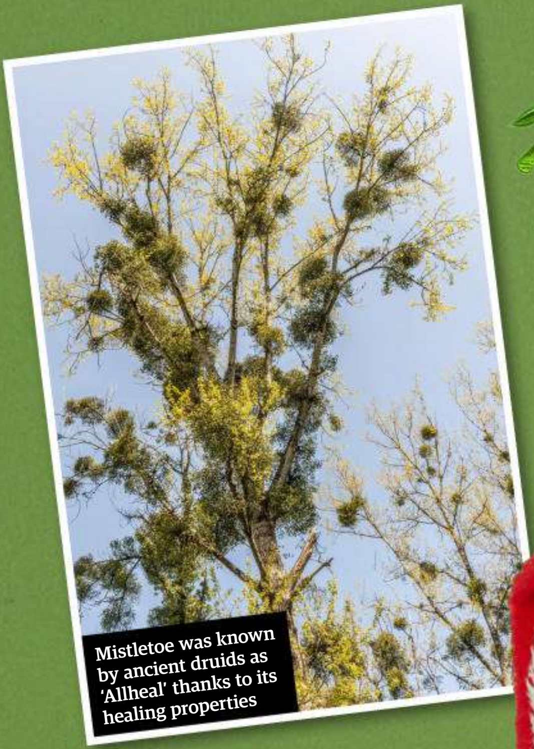
A French new year postcard from 1890, heavily featuring mistletoe



Mistletoe was known by ancient druids as 'Allheal' thanks to its healing properties

HO HO HO HO HO

Mistletoe is now associated with kissing at Christmas

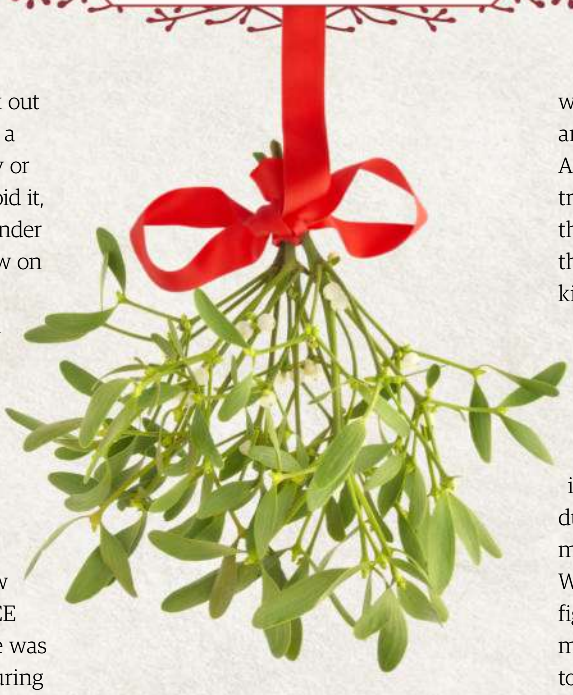
Under the Mistletoe

A kiss under the mistletoe is a Christmas tradition, but why is this strange plant associated with midwinter festivities?

Written by Katharine Marsh

Whether you seek out the mistletoe at a Christmas party or you actively avoid it, it can seem a bit strange that standing under a plant means you're open for a kiss. How on Earth did this ever come about?

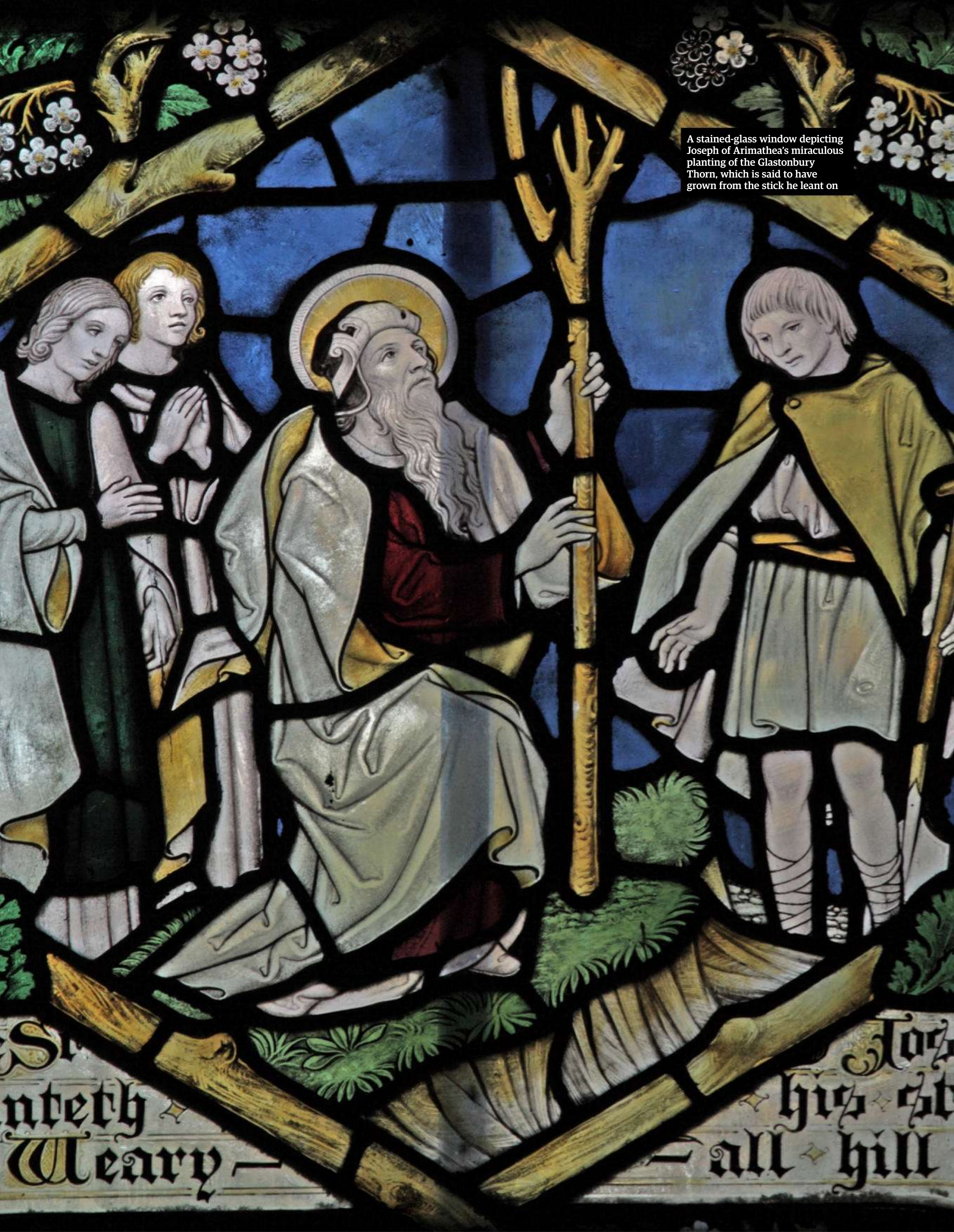
While the ancient Greeks were known to use mistletoe to cure everything from menstrual cramps to epilepsy, it was also a plant of peace. If enemies met under it in the forest, they would lay down their weapons until the next day. It's mentioned in Virgil's epic the *Aeneid* as helping the hero visit the Underworld. It's most likely that our view of the plant has come from 1st century CE Celtic druids, though. To them, mistletoe was sacred thanks to its ability to blossom during freezing winters, and it was used by both people and animals in the hope that it would restore fertility, often called 'Allheal'. However, it is worth remembering that it's actually a highly toxic plant when ingested. It was also hung above doors for good luck.



But it wasn't just the druids who were rather taken by mistletoe. In Norse mythology, it was declared by Frigg to be a symbol of love when it was used to bring Baldur back from the dead. She vowed to kiss anyone who passed underneath it. This story was taken with the Vikings as they raided and conquered northern Europe, and the Anglo-Saxons were known to partake in the tradition. When the English began to roam the world in search of new land to settle in the Middle Ages, they took their mistletoe kissing with them and spread it to the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and more.

In non-English-speaking countries, though, the emphasis seems to be more on the side of peace. In France, mistletoe is given as a porte bonheur, or gift for luck, during the festive season. The French prefer mistletoe at New Year. And during World War I, embroidered postcards sent from the fighting fronts at Christmas often featured mistletoe as a symbol of peace and a message to missed loved ones.

Mistletoe has long appeared in midwinter customs, but its relationship with Christmas is entirely incidental as it predates Christianity in most places. In fact, it can often be banned from decorations in churches due to its pagan associations.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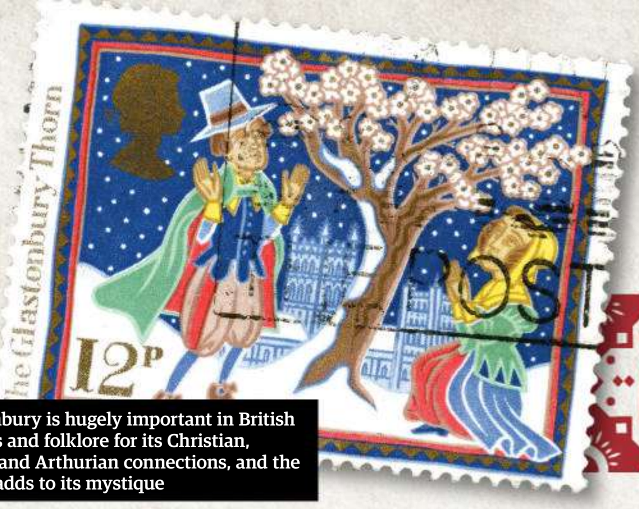
A stained-glass window depicting Joseph of Arimathea's miraculous planting of the Glastonbury Thorn, which is said to have grown from the stick he leant on



Glastonbury is hugely important in British legends and folklore for its Christian, pagan, and Arthurian connections, and the Thorn adds to its mystique

The Glastonbury Thorn

Legend says this Christmas-flowering hawthorn in one of Britain's most spiritually important places was miraculously planted by Joseph of Arimathea

Written by April Madden

The travellers had come from far away, and as they set foot on the island hill above the Somerset Levels their leader, an old man who despite his apparent wealth had clearly seen much hardship, leaned heavily on his walking stick and exclaimed "We are weary, all." He was an elder of a new religion from across the seas, and it seemed that his god was with him, for when his staff struck the earth it bloomed white, sprung up, and became a hawthorn tree, long a symbol of magic and divine favour among the native folk of Roman Britain.

So begins the story of the Holy Thorn, a biblically influenced folktale that provides reasons for the name of Glastonbury's Wearyall Hill, for the legend that the world-famous Somerset village was the location of the first Christian worship in the British Isles, and for the strange flowering cycle of its unique type of hawthorn, the Glastonbury Thorn. Like other hawthorn this shrub blooms in May, but it also has a second flowering season in the winter, around Christmas.

The man that brought his miraculous walking stick to Wearyall Hill was Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus who in the gospels took responsibility for Christ's body after the Crucifixion and who paid for and enacted the funerary rights, setting the body in what he had planned to be his own tomb (thereby fulfilling a messianic prophecy). In later Arthurian tales, Joseph of Arimathea is also the first keeper of the Holy Grail, the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper and the symbol of the holy blood spilled to redeem mankind's sins. Joseph was a wealthy, well-travelled businessman; other medieval legends have him acting as a mentor to the young Jesus and bringing the boy to Britain to study theology with the druids and learn the secrets of metallurgy from Cornish smiths.

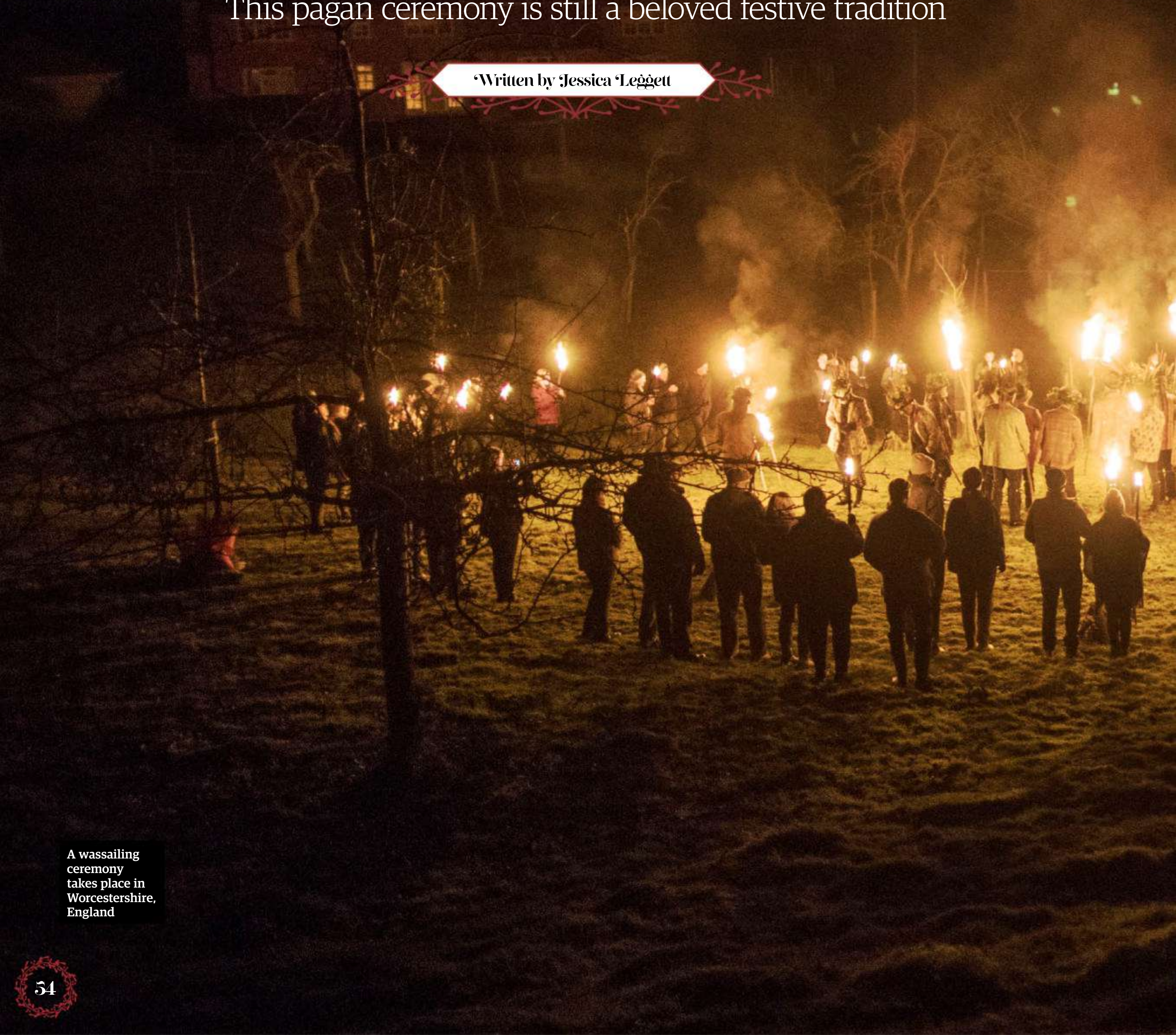
The miraculous Glastonbury Thorn cannot be propagated from seed; only cuttings taken from the original plant show the unique winter flowering. Despite several attempts to destroy it by puritans, landowners and vandals, dedicated Glastonbury locals have ensured that grafts of the Thorn live on in the local churchyard of St John and in other, secret locations to ensure its preservation. A flowering sprig of it, cut by the eldest child at the local infants' school, is presented to the British monarch each Christmas, a centuries-old tradition that was revived in 1929.

A Glastonbury Thorn in bloom. The trees flower twice a year, in spring and around Christmas

Wassailing

This pagan ceremony is still a beloved festive tradition

Written by Jessica Leggett



A wassailing ceremony takes place in Worcestershire, England

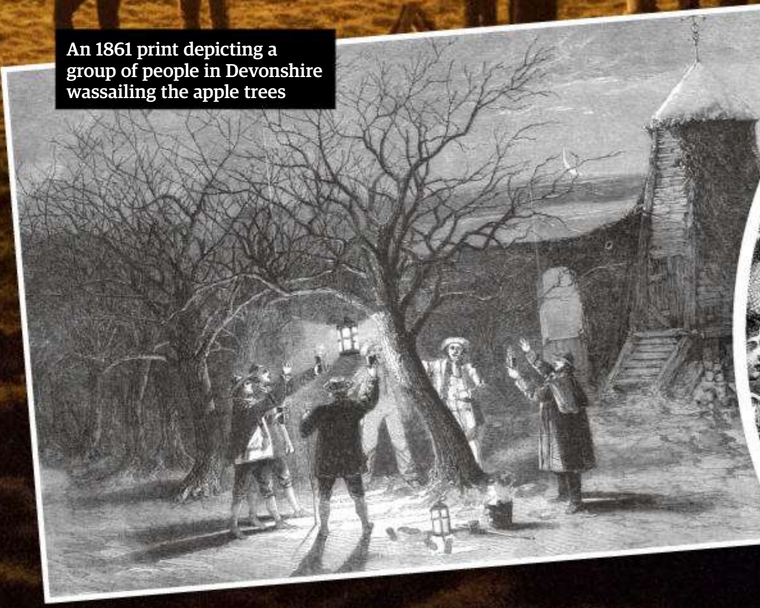
Although it is rarely practised today, wassailing is an English pagan custom usually performed for Twelfth Night. The word 'wassail' is thought to derive from the Anglo-Saxon phrase 'waes hael', meaning 'to be well'. According to one legend, the custom of wassailing was created after a maiden, Rowena, presented Vortigern, king of the Britons, with a goblet of wine and toasted him with the words 'waes hael.'

The wassail drink was made with roasted apples, oranges, spices, eggs, sugar or honey, although it was made with ale or mead in some parts of the country. Sometimes, burst apples would be added on top of the wassail, which became known as 'lamb's wool' because of the frothy pulp. wassail would be served in a large bowl.

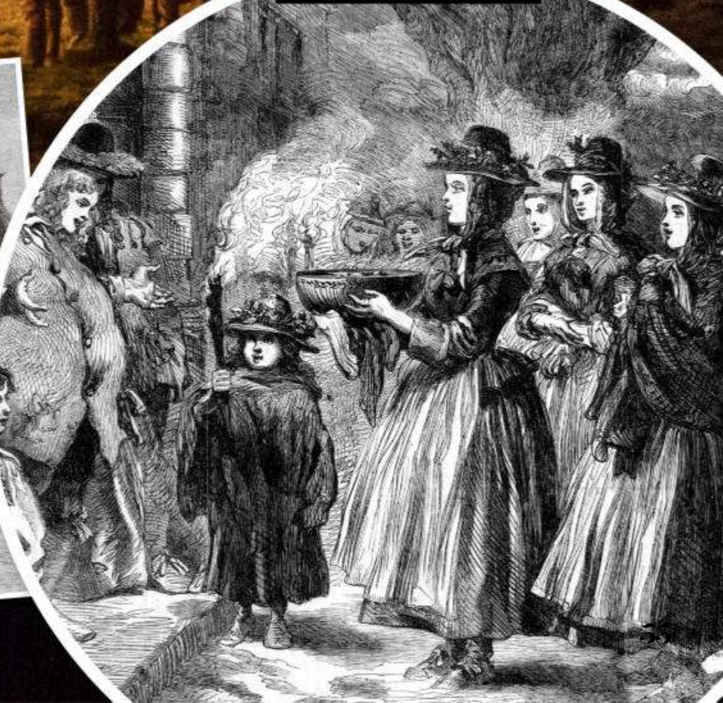
Wassailing could take different forms depending on the local traditions, but there were two variations that were the most common. The first involved a group of people, carrying a wassail bowl and singing traditional wassail songs, visiting homes and wishing the residents good health for the year ahead – this would eventually be overtaken by the practice of carolling. During the Middle Ages, wassailers would visit their feudal lord and in return for their blessings, the lord would gift them food and drink.

The second variation of wassailing usually took place in rural areas. Wassailers would visit their local orchards to dance, sing to the trees and bless them, wishing for a good harvest of fruit for the upcoming season, while banging pots and pans. Not only did the wassailers want to please the spirits of the trees, but they also wanted to scare off any bad spirits that could ruin the crop for the year ahead. The orchard owner would give the revellers a communal wassail bowl to share in gratitude for their well-wishes.

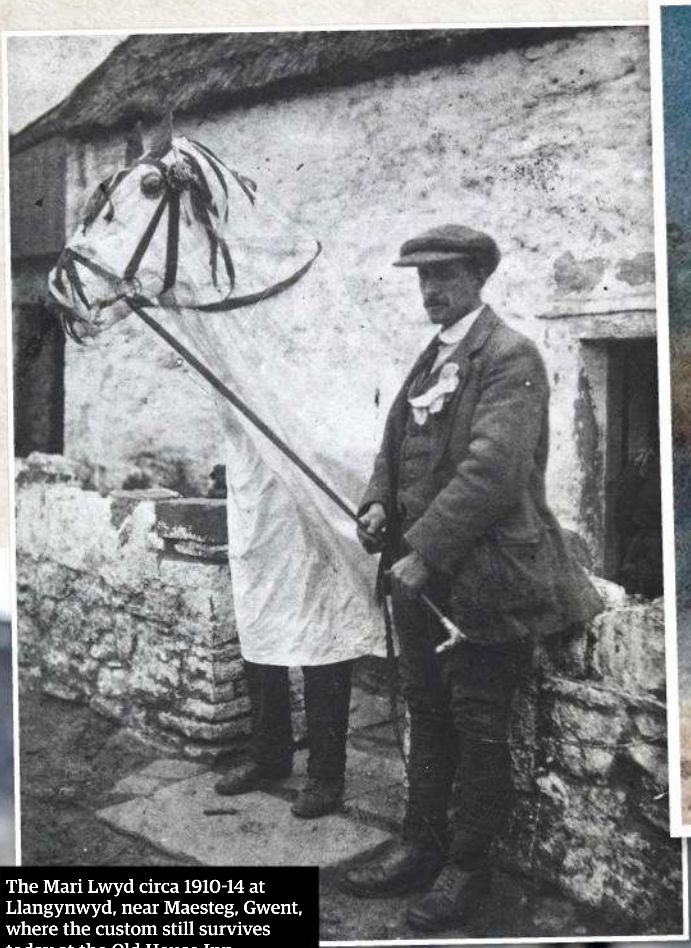
There were many songs to accompany an orchard-wassailing trip, with the most notable including *The Wassailer's Carol*, *Here We Come a-Wassailing* and *The Gloucestershire Wassail Song*. A King or Queen would be appointed to lead the wassail and begin the singing as the wassailers proceeded from one orchard to the next. These wassail songs are still performed today on Twelfth Night by some rural communities in Britain – particularly in cider-producing regions – who continue to go wassailing to their local orchards and fruit trees.



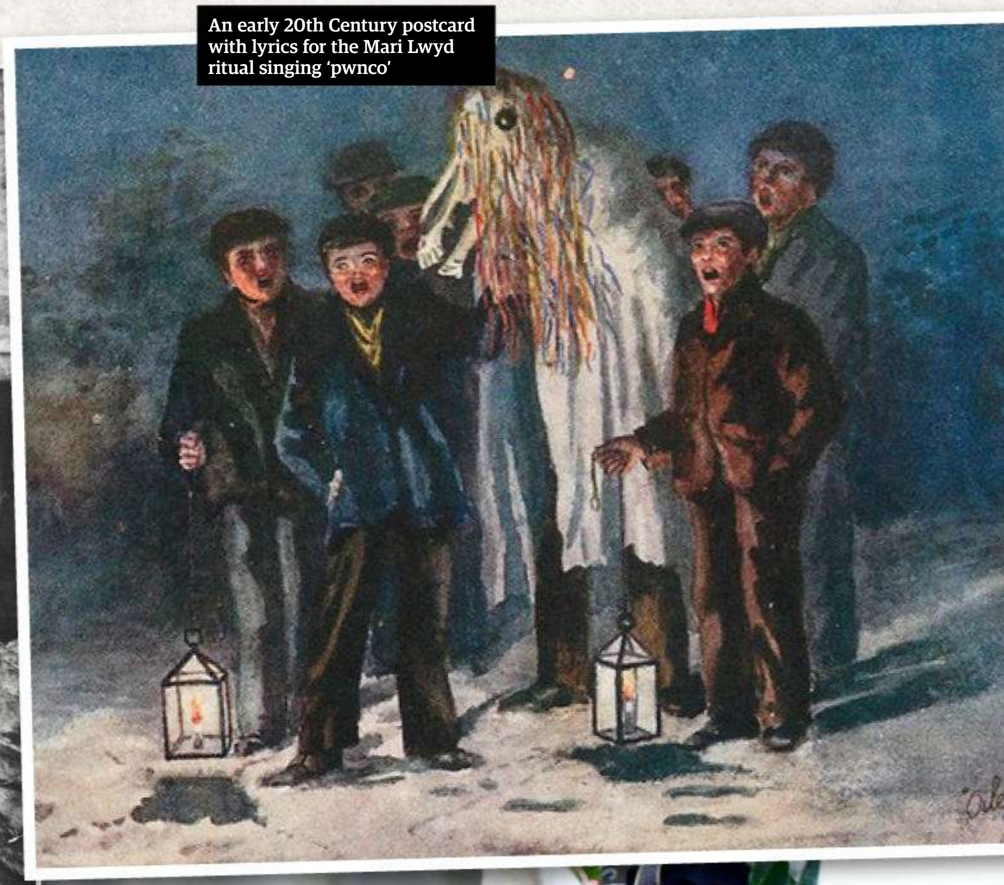
An 1861 print depicting a group of people in Devonshire wassailing the apple trees



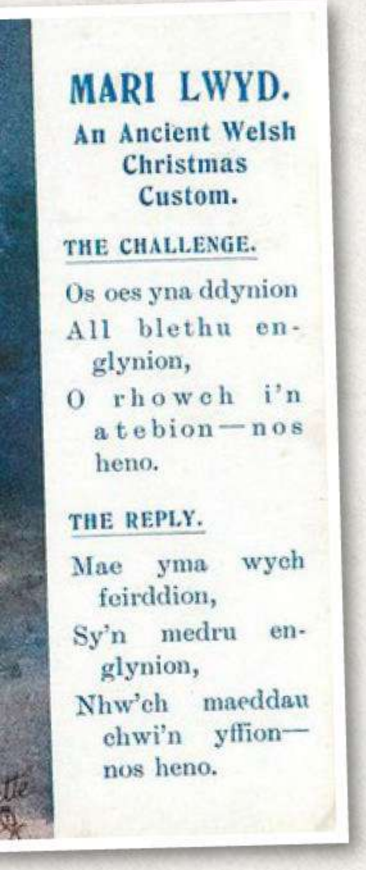
Revellers would be rewarded with a communal bowl of wassail cider



The Mari Lwyd circa 1910-14 at Llangynwyd, near Maesteg, Gwent, where the custom still survives today at the Old House Inn



An early 20th Century postcard with lyrics for the Mari Lwyd ritual singing 'pwnco'



MARI LWYD.

An Ancient Welsh
Christmas
Custom.

THE CHALLENGE.

Os oes yna ddynion
All blethu englynion,
O rhowch i'n atebion—nos heno.

THE REPLY.

Mae yma wych feirddion,
Sy'n medru englynion,
Nhw'ch maeddau chwi'n yffion—nos heno.

The Mari Lwyd

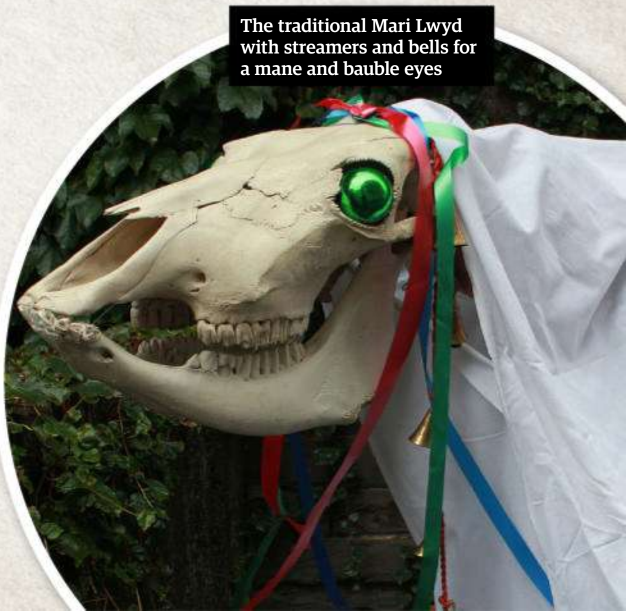
A horse's skull paraded from door to door might not sound very festive, but in South Wales, it's a favourite yuletide tradition

Written by Alice Pattillo

In the Celtic nation of Wales there is a rather bizarre yuletide mumming tradition called the Mari Lwyd. Between Christmas and Twelfth Night, a house-wassailing tradition takes place. A horse's skull, jaw still intact, would be decorated with glass, lights or baubles for eyes, a mane made of holly and ivy or bells and streamers flowing like hair, and a sheet disguising its wielder (who would often snap its jaw up and down while holding the large equine head on a pole). The rather frightful sight would be accompanied by other traditional characters such as Punch and Judy, and the eerie crew would parade from door to door. Upon knocking, the collective would sing Welsh language songs in order to gain entry to homes to which the occupiers of each house would reply, again in song. Traditionally, the household and the group would indulge in a ritual known as 'pwnco', an exchange of rude rhymes, where the household would recite a number of excuses as to why the procession could not enter, until, more often than not, the cohort would finally be invited inside for food and drinks. In return, the household would receive good luck for the year. However, the Mari Lwyd is a mischievous old mare, and she may try to steal possessions or chase those she fancies (as well as children too) and generally cause havoc, so beware!

The origins of Mari Lwyd are rather mysterious. The first written record of the tradition dates back to 1800 and J Evans' book, *A Tour Through Part of North Wales*. Curiously, however, the custom is best known for its practice in the South counties of Gwent and Glamorgan, where it was practised until the 1960s, and it has experienced a modern revival, with incarnations still existing to this day (most notably in the towns of Llantrisant and Llangynwyd).

One translation of Mari's name is Grey Mare – suggesting her origin may have something to do with the mythical pale horses from Celtic legend, said to be messengers from the otherworld. Another translation is that Mari Lwyd means Grey Mary, linking her to the nativity story. Mari of course shares many similarities with other wassailing and mumming customs, and is no doubt connected to numerous other Christmas time hooded animal traditions across Britain such as the Hoodening in Kent, the Broad in the Cotswolds and the northern customs of Old Tup, Old Ball and Old Horse.



The traditional Mari Lwyd with streamers and bells for a mane and bauble eyes

Plays Take Centre Stage

How the Christmas tradition of medieval mummers' plays went on to inspire some of your favourite festive pantomimes

Written by Poppy-Jay St. Palmer

Old Father Christmas is a frequently appearing character

The word 'mummers' comes from the Early New High German term meaning 'disguised person', which is a perfect way to describe the extravagantly costumed actors

The British are partial to weird traditions, and the festive season is chock full of them. While newer traditions include crackers, Christmas trees, a turkey dinner and falling asleep in front of the Queen's Speech, some British Christmas traditions can be traced back to the early Middle Ages. Take, for example, mummers' plays.

Adding a touch of theatricality to the usual Christmas proceedings, mummers' plays are folk plays performed by half a dozen or so amateur (traditionally all male) actors in streets or during visits to houses and pubs. The term 'mummer' is thought to have originated from the Early New High German word meaning 'disguised person', and for good reason: in medieval times, the mummers (the actors performing in the plays) would don elaborate masks and costumes that would allow them to take on a variety of roles.

The plays themselves were usually loosely based on the legend of St George and the Dragon, and could give modern pantos a run for their money. In fact, many pantomimes contain archetypal elements of mummers plays, including magical creatures, crass humour, gender role reversals, over-the-top stage fights and the idea of good overcoming evil.

Characters were traditionally introduced using short speeches, often written in rhyming couplets. St George, or King George, stood at the centre of most plays as the hero, although in the Cotswolds the hero was Robin Hood and in Scotland it was Galoshin. Mummers' plays love a metaphor, and as such King George was a symbol for Time, killing off the old year, or the Sun overcoming winter. Secondary characters were also archetypal and included the Doctor (a comedic shaman-like figure that cures the Earth from the deadness of winter) and his assistant, the Dragon (resurrected by the doctor, with his fiery breath representing the Sun), the Slasher or Turkish Knight (slain by King George and representing the old year), the Sheba (the Earth Goddess that brings fertility to the land), the Devil (a force of evil that aimed to stop the sun from rising), and the Fool (no explanation necessary). Old Father Christmas - a different figure to Santa Claus - would also appear as the play's narrator.

Over the years, the tradition spread from the British Isles to former British colonies and became a popular fixture of Christmas, Easter and Plough Monday. Although mummers' plays can't compete with the likes of *Jack and the Beanstalk* and *Cinderella* in 21st century Britain, they are still performed today.

Although Mummers' Plays are no longer a regular Christmas fixture for much of the British population, they are still enthusiastically performed in some parts of the country

Wren Day began in medieval times, but people all over Ireland still celebrate it today

Wren Day has changed with the times - modern iterations of the celebration no longer include the killing of wrens, and it's no longer just men and boys that get involved

Ireland's Wren Day

From collecting money to instigating brawls, the Irish tradition of Wren Day marks the day after Christmas Day

Written by Poppy-Jay St. Palmer

Come the end of Christmas Day, the festivities are rarely over. People from cultures and locations all over the world like to keep the celebrations going into 26 December. In Great Britain, it's Boxing Day, often observed through watching the football, hitting the sales, and attending the panto. In much of mainland Europe, it's Saint Stephen's Day, a time for religious reflection and even more food. In the United States, it's just the day after Christmas and a time for rest. But in Ireland, it's Wren Day.

Observed in conjunction with St Stephen's Day, Wren Day (pronounced 'wran') is the last of Ireland's ten public holidays a year. Though it doesn't have quite the reputation of St Patrick's Day, the traditions associated with 26 December are just as unique. The holiday first began back in medieval times. From the 16th to the early 20th century, each Wren Day began with a group of wrenboys (villagers in fancy dress) setting out to hunt a wren. The unlucky bird was then placed atop the wrenboy leader's decorated staff, dead or alive, and paraded around the local area. With the wren staff held high, the wrenboys in the countryside went house-to-house collecting money, which was usually donated to a school or charity, or used to host an extravagant 'Wren Ball' for the villagers on a January night. The celebration was somewhat different for the wrenboys in the towns, who would sometimes instigate faction fighting, encouraging often dangerous mass brawls.

Alongside the wrenboys and the parading of the wren, other locals would also get involved, playing music and donning disguises, like masks, straw costumes, blackened faces and old-woman drag. While in costume, people would also use the opportunity to play tricks on their friends. Many participants received a feather from the wren, given to them by the wrenboys for good luck. Nowadays, no hunting is involved and the wrens are fake, but most of the other festivities have endured.

The origin of the vendetta against the wrens is thought to have started in the Viking era, when a Celtic plot to ambush a camp of Viking raiders was thwarted by wrens. Just before the attack came to fruition, a wren started pecking crumbs off the drum the Vikings used to regulate their oar stroke aboard ship, waking the soldiers up. Another legend says that the singing of a wren betrayed the hiding place of St Stephen, the first martyr, before he was stoned to death. The hunt is Ireland's revenge on the bird.

On Wren Day, wrenboys would parade through towns with a wren atop a decorative stick, collecting money from villagers

According to some festive myths, reindeer aren't the only animals that gain magical abilities at Christmas time.

Animal Magic

How the nativity's bowing donkey, and sinister folktales, led to the legend that animals gain supernatural powers each Christmas Eve

Written by Poppy-Jay St. Palmer

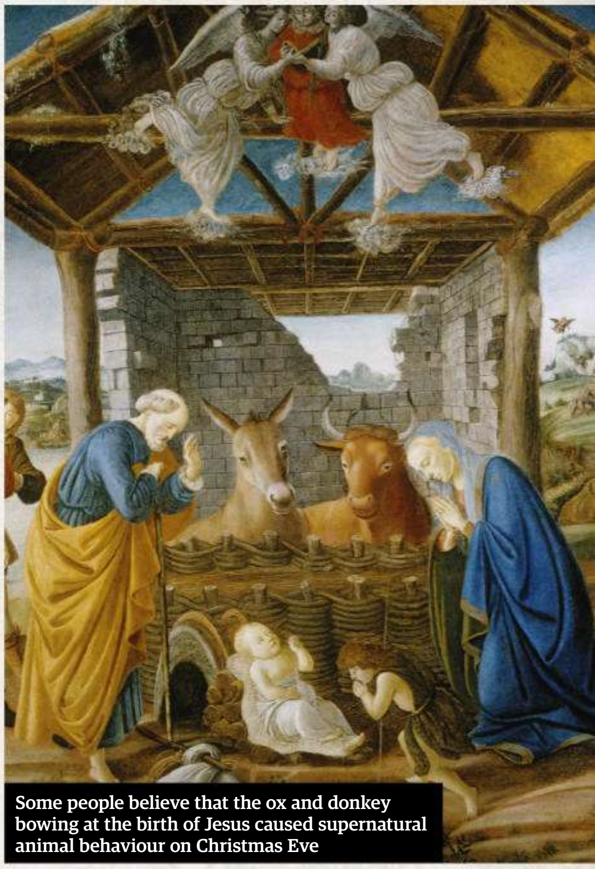
From the birth of Jesus to a visit from Santa on his sleigh, much about the festive season is magical to many. But flying reindeer aren't the only creatures thought to get special abilities at Christmas time. Magical animals crop up in seasonal mythology across the world. Take, for instance, the European legend of talking animals. In many countries across the Continent, some lightheartedly like to believe that farmyard animals and household pets gain the ability to speak at the stroke of midnight on Christmas Eve.

The idea of talking animals may sound quaint, but some variations of the myth put a somewhat darker spin on it. In *The Christmas Troll and Other Yuletide Stories* by Clement A Miles, a dog and cat team up and hatch a plot to kill their master. In another version told in the German Alps, a farm servant hides in the stable on Christmas Eve with the hope of hearing the horses speak. Instead, he finds a steed foretelling his death. Tales like these are why some people view talking animals as more of a bad omen than a flight of fancy.

The legend of the talking animals is often linked to the belief that the Baby Jesus was born at exactly midnight on Christmas Day, a magical occurrence that caused a number of supernatural phenomena. Though its exact origin can't be identified, many reckon the legend has pagan beginnings. Others think they can trace it back to the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia, a week-long winter holiday where social roles were reversed and masters traditionally served their slaves.

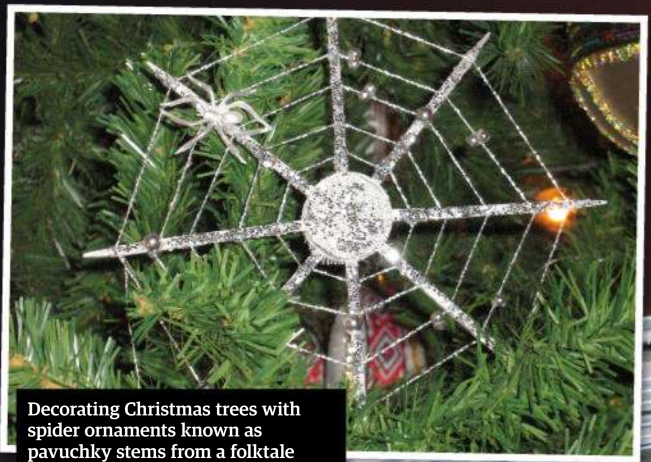
In the nativity story, that we know today, the ox and donkey present in the stable each took a knee to bow when Jesus was born. This unusual behaviour also features in a number of festive folktales: in *Sketches of Upper Canada* written by John Howison in 1821, Howison recounts that a Native American person once told him that deer fall upon their knees to the Great Spirit each Christmas Night.

Perhaps the most unusual myth of them all features in William Henderson's book *Folk-lore of the Northern Counties of England and Their Borders*, published in 1879. He claims that a family friend once witnessed a swarm of bees assemble themselves into a choir to hum a hymn on Christmas Eve. You'd be forgiven for presuming the man in question had consumed one too many sherries, but in the English parish of Whitebeck it's common knowledge that bees begin to sing as the clock strikes 12 on 25 December.



Some people believe that the ox and donkey bowing at the birth of Jesus caused supernatural animal behaviour on Christmas Eve

Many Europeans lightheartedly believe that animals gain the power of speech at the stroke of midnight each Christmas Eve, with mixed results



Decorating Christmas trees with spider ornaments known as pavuchky stems from a folktale that has been passed down through Ukrainian families

Every culture has its traditions, and Ukrainians like to add spider ornaments to their trees at Christmas

The Legend of the Pavuchky

Spiders adorn the Christmas trees of many Ukrainian households each year, and are thought to bring luck and good fortune

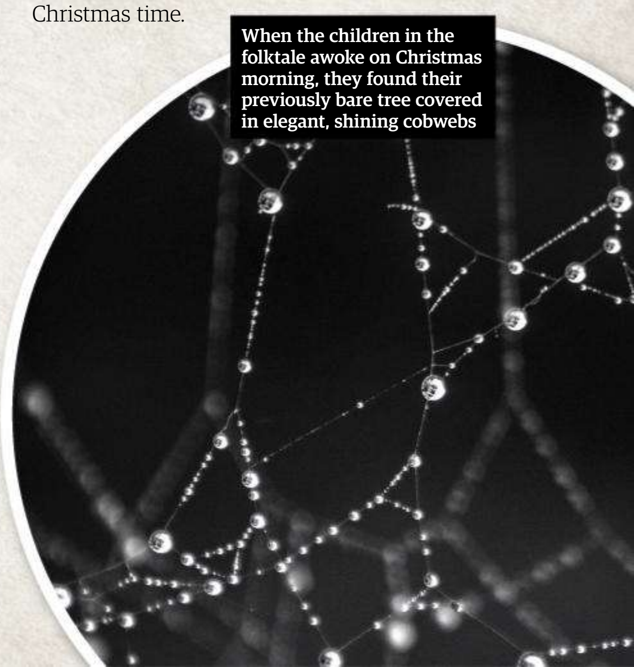
Written by Poppy-Jay St. Palmer

When you think of Halloween, witches, pumpkins and spiders might be one of the first things that come to mind. But in Ukraine, the eight-legged creatures stick around for Christmas too. Alongside the baubles, tinsel and candy canes adorning the branches of the Christmas tree, many Ukrainians add a festive spider ornament – known as pavuchky, which translates to 'little spiders' – when decorating their tree. It may seem unusual but, like many of the best Christmas traditions, it began with a folktale.

Once upon a time, there lived a hardworking widowed mother who lived in a lowly hut with her children. While the sun was high in the summer, a pine cone fell upon the earthen floor of the family's humble home. Taking root, the pine cone began to grow. The children tended to the sapling, and were excited by the prospect of having a Christmas tree for winter. But while the tree flourished under their care, the autumn and winter months were hard on the struggling family and used up what little money they had.

When the festive season came around, they found that they couldn't afford to decorate their new Christmas tree. The woman and her disappointed children went to bed on Christmas Eve, lamenting their poor fortune. Hearing the children's sobs, the spiders living in their hut decided to help bring some Christmas magic to them. They crawled over to the bare tree and began spinning beautiful webs between its branches. When the children awoke the next morning, they were thrilled to find the first rays of sunlight shining through the windows of their hut, lighting up the elegant webs to make them shine like dazzling Christmas lights. Overjoyed, the children ran to fetch their mother. Upon seeing the tree, the woman could hardly believe her eyes. From that Christmas on, she never again felt poor, and was always grateful for the blessings she already had.

The telling of this twee legend can vary, depending on who you hear it from. Some tell the story from the spiders' point of view, while others replace the sunlight shining through the window with a miracle of Father Christmas, Santa Claus or the Baby Jesus. But whichever way you spin it, the tale is why many Ukrainians believe that spiders can bring luck and good fortune into the New Year, and why you'll often find decorative spider ornaments in Ukrainian households at Christmas time.



When the children in the folktale awoke on Christmas morning, they found their previously bare tree covered in elegant, shining cobwebs

Christmas Witches

Witches might not come to mind when thinking about Christmas, but in northern European folklore they love the festive season

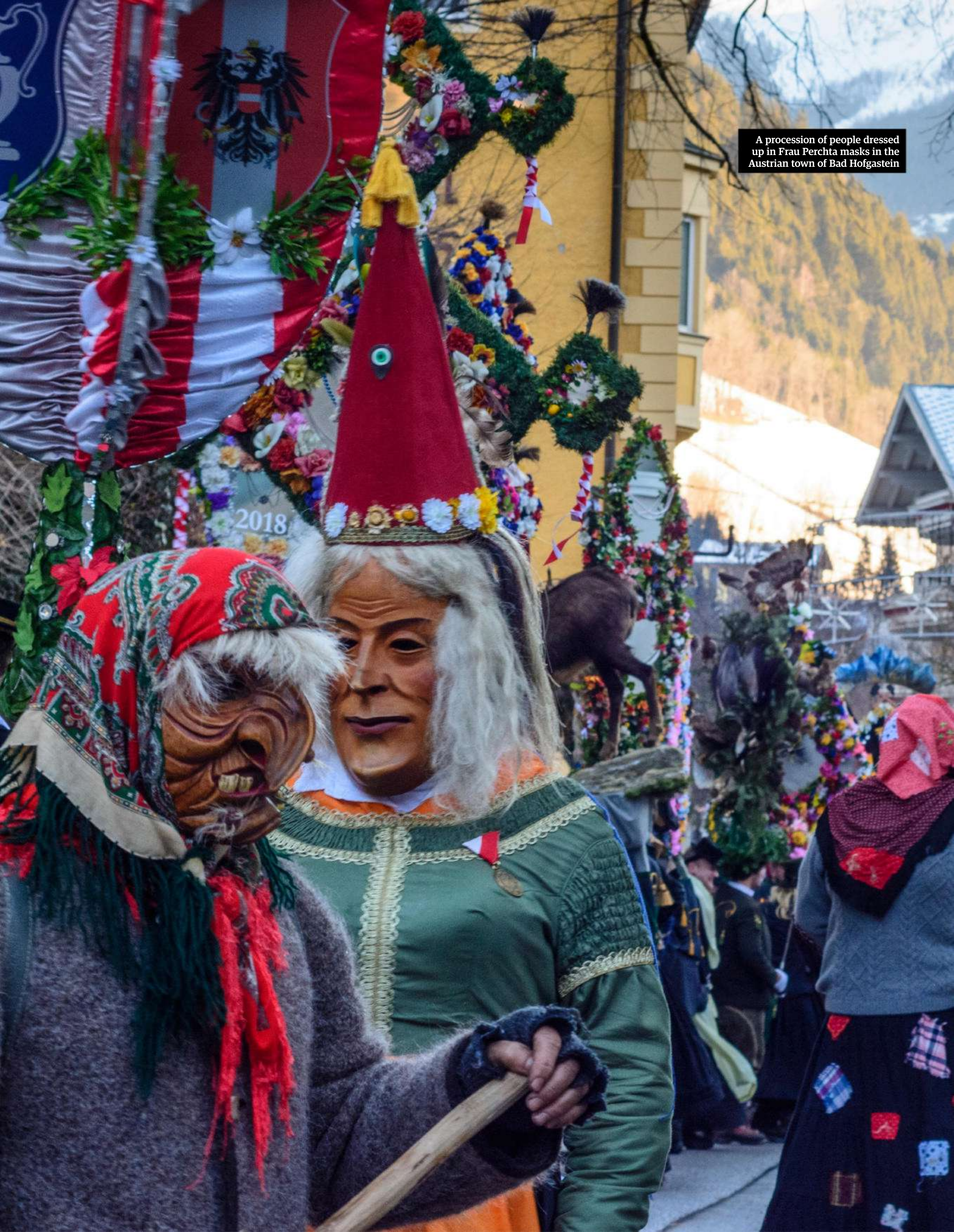
Written by Alice Pattillo

In European mythology, otherworldly spirits would be unleashed upon the world during winter. Beginning at Halloween and ending at Easter, the cold, dark nights were a terrifying prospect for ancient and medieval peoples, and a time that many wouldn't survive. By the medieval age and the added fearmongering surrounding witches, much of folklore is full of superstitions of witches' sabbats occurring at Halloween, Christmas or Easter, and similar rituals and traditions occur across all of these major festivals. In Norway, one such belief that likely stems from pre-Christian times is the idea that witches emerge on Christmas Eve, and it is traditional to hide all the brooms in your household to prevent them from spreading evil and chaos.

But Christmas associations with witches don't end there. In Germany and Austria, there lies the legend of Frau Perchta, whose origins lurk in Alpine paganism. An ugly goose-footed hag who goes from house to house during the 12 days of Christmas, she is said to put a silver coin in your shoe if you've been good, or slit you open and replace your stomach and guts with straw and pebbles if you've been bad. She was particularly keen to punish women who hadn't finished their spinning of flax or wool and those who hadn't eaten the traditional supper of fish and gruel. In Scotland, there is a similar witch who goes by the name of Gyre-Carling, who will also punish those who have not spun their flax by Twelfth Night. Gyre-Carling is a little more compassionate, however, and will merely beat you with an iron club rather than gut you.

In Iceland, the mountains are haunted by the wicked ogeress Gryla, and her partner in crime, the Yule Cat. Gryla snatches misbehaving children and tosses them into her giant sack, ready to take home to her icy cave dwelling and cook up in her stew to eat. Her familiar, the Yule Cat, isn't much better. He gobbles up anyone not dressed for the holiday in brand new clothes, so be a little more grateful for that pack of socks under the tree and the freshly knitted sweater from grandma!

In Italy, the season isn't quite so brutal – in terms of both weather and mythology. Perhaps the less extreme climate is to thank for their Christmas witch, La Befana, who simply gives out sweets to children and rides from house to house on her broomstick, sweeping the houses of the children she visits. Legend has it that La Befana does all this on her endless search for the Baby Jesus. After offering the three wise men a place to stay on their journey to Bethlehem, she wished to tag along, only to lose them en route.



A procession of people dressed up in Frau Perchta masks in the Austrian town of Bad Hofgastein

Dolls of Befana on sale in Italy

Men and women parade in traditional costumes during the Epiphany Befana festival in Florence, Italy

La Befana

In Italy, a traditional present-giver is the witch-like La Befana, an ancient sibil who regrets not visiting the Baby Jesus alongside the Three Kings

Written by Katharine Marsh

Although Santa has become a part of the Christmas tradition in the West, Italy has another gift giver ready to reward good children alongside the jolly red Babbo Natale: La Befana. Instead of coming on Christmas Eve, however, she visits on 6 January, or the Feast of Epiphany, the 12th day of Christmas.

Befana is a witch, or at least witch-like, and rides a broom. According to legend, she crossed paths with the Wise Men while they were on their journey to visit the Baby Jesus, but she declined the offer to join them. She soon regretted her decision and tried to follow the same bright star, but got lost along the way. Instead she left her gifts at the doors of other children, and she continues to do so to this day. Up and down the Italian peninsula, children hang up their stockings or leave out their shoes before they head to bed on 5 January. Some will even sing a song:

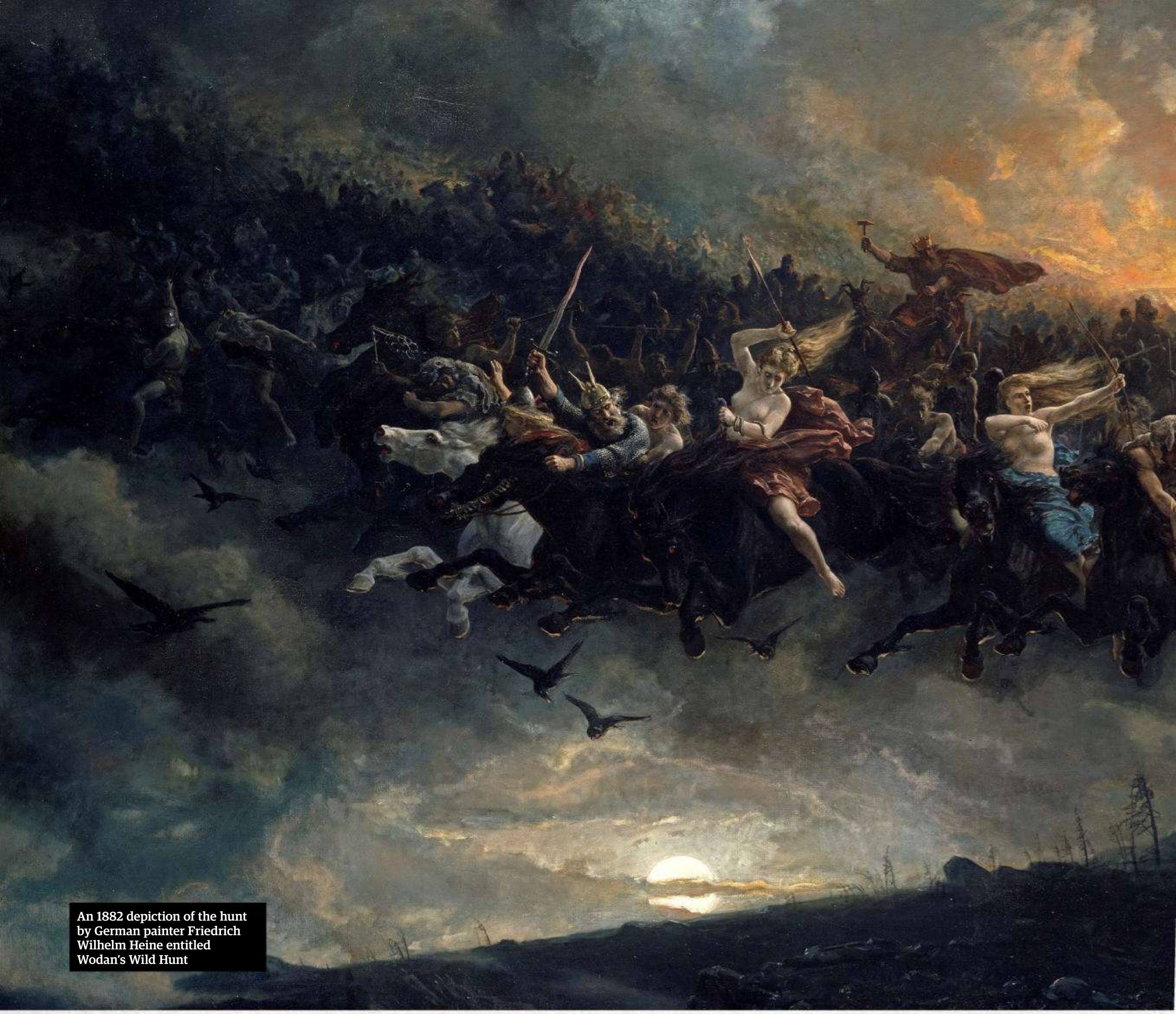
La Befana vien di notte
con le scarpe tutte rotte
col cappello alla romana
viva viva La Befana.

("The Befana comes at night, with worn-out shoes, with a Roman-style cap, long live La Befana!") During the night, Befana flies around on her broomstick and down chimneys to deliver sweets and gifts to those who have been good - and lumps of coal to the naughty ones.

Befana is actually older than jolly old St Nick, though. She seems to have appeared in the 8th century as part of Italy's Epiphany celebrations, and her roots come from the ancient Alpine Celts, who had a priestess set a wicker puppet on fire to honour the gods. Other Celtic influences have led her to have a broom, which is connected to druidic nature rituals. Parts of Befana have changed over the years, though - she has been a witch and a housewife - but her appearance has always been roughly the same: an ugly old woman with a hooked, knotty nose, a wart and a patchwork dress.

The tradition of Befana has been fading away, though, as she is increasingly being replaced by Babbo Natale, or Father Christmas. However, re-imaginings of her paint her as an animal lover, an ecologist and a justice bearer, so it's unlikely that she will ever completely vanish from Italian homes.

Befana is recognisable by her broom, hooked nose and wart

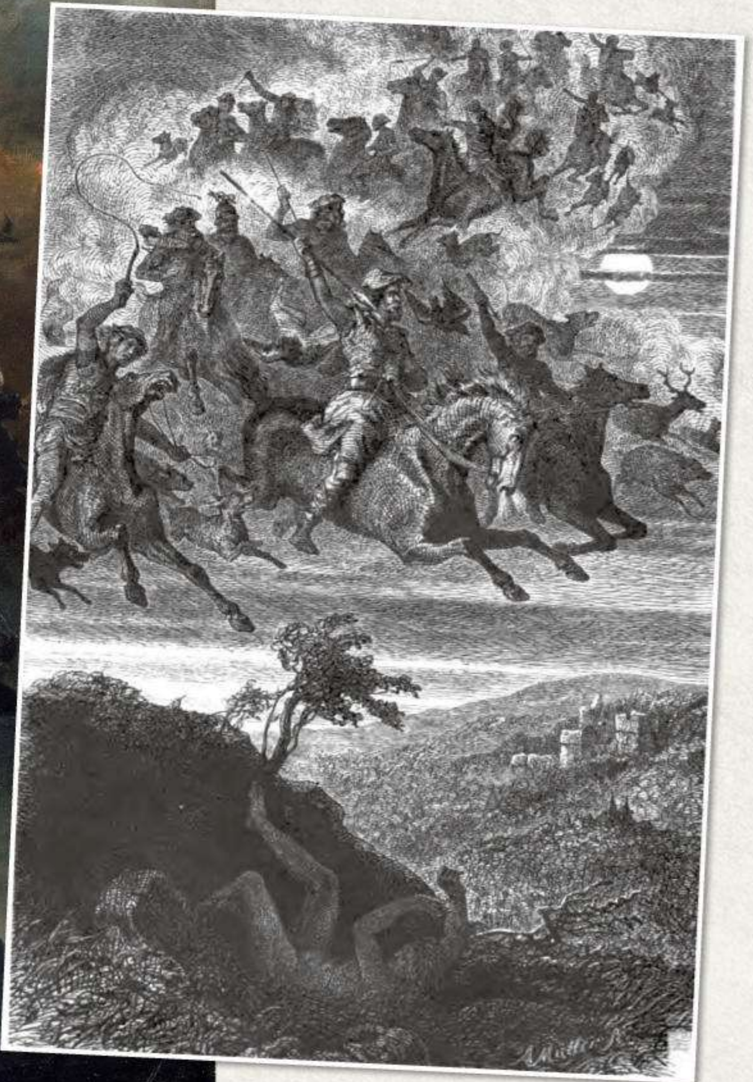


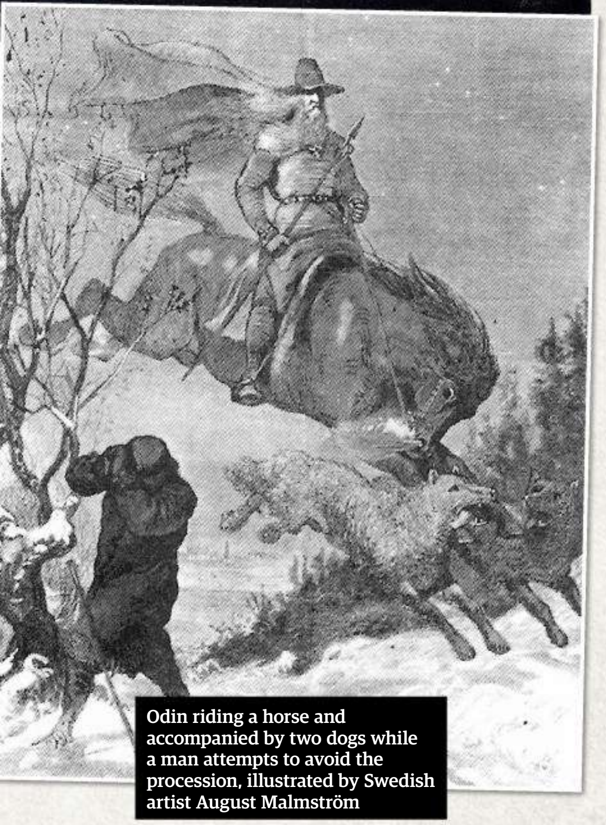
An 1882 depiction of the hunt by German painter Friedrich Wilhelm Heine entitled Wodan's Wild Hunt

The Wild Hunt

There's a prevailing myth that a ghostly procession led by a legendary spectral huntsman haunts the wild landscapes of northern Europe

Written by Alice Pattillo





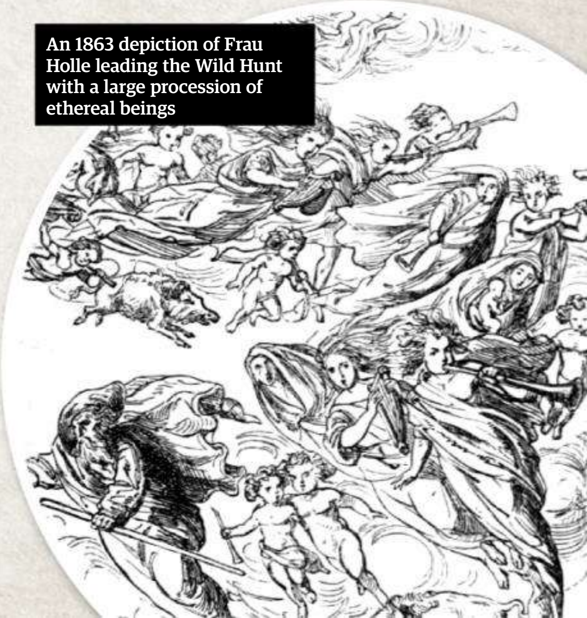
Odin riding a horse and accompanied by two dogs while a man attempts to avoid the procession, illustrated by Swedish artist August Malmström

First popularised by folklorist Jacob Grimm - of the Brothers Grimm - in 1835, the concept of the Wild Hunt is a myth that spans across northern Europe, most notably the British Isles, Germany and Scandinavia. Typically, it is a chase led by the apparition of a legendary figure, accompanied by a ghostly procession of hunters in pursuit - of what, we don't know. According to lore, if you are unfortunate enough to witness the hunt it's a bad omen: from the foreshadowing of war or plague to your own death or abduction, it's unlikely you will walk away unscathed.

Grimm himself credited the myth's origins to Norse pagan beliefs, presumably spread throughout Europe with the Vikings. In Scandinavian lore, the Wild Hunt is led by the all-father, Odin. A term given to the hunt in the great North is Oskoreia, meaning terrifying hunt, indicating the fear associated with it. Odin is often said to be riding a one-wheeled chariot and accompanied by the souls of the damned or ominous black hounds, and is heard but rarely seen. In one area of Sweden, it was custom for people to take bread and a piece of steel with them to church at Christmas in order to use the steel to fend off the leader of the hunt and the bread to distract the dogs.

In Britain, early medieval accounts paint pictures of hideous demonic men riding black horses or he-goats, suggesting a connection with the devil, and occasionally Satan himself would oversee the ride. In later accounts riders morphed from demons to Celtic faeries and numerous deities and mythological heroes were credited with leading the magical army - including Odin, of course, but also King Arthur and the legendary ghost Herne the Hunter. In Wales, Gwynn ap Nudd, the ruler of the Celtic otherworld of Annwn, oversaw the procession, while in Ireland it was the king of the Tuatha Dé Danann, Nuada. Hellhounds, including the dreaded Welsh Cwn Annwn, accompanied the hunters and various origin stories sprung up, suggesting who the fugitive could be.

In Germany, the leader of the procession was referred to as 'der Schimmelreiter', and was often Odin or an undead nobleman who had been cursed to ride eternally as part of the hunt. Sometimes the leader was female, such as Frau Hulda or Perchta. There were two versions of the Wild Hunt in Germany, the host and the hunt. In the hunt, a man would typically go out in front to warn people of the oncoming procession, which could involve hunters fighting between each other. The hunt would sometimes function just as those across the rest of northern Europe - with no prey - but could also feature a female demon being captured, or in some cases the capture of a white hart. Some legends feature one sole hunter upon horseback, accompanied by hounds. In any case, if you come across the ghostly procession on German soil and stand up against them you will be punished, and if you choose to aid them, you will be rewarded (although usually with a cursed piece of meat). But to be safe, curiously all you need to do is stand in the middle of the road...



An 1863 depiction of Frau Holle leading the Wild Hunt with a large procession of ethereal beings

The most wonderful time of year for spreading some Christmas fear!

We Wish You a Scary Christmas

Christmas is supposed to be a peaceful time of year – yet folklore around the world is full of festive frighteners

Written by Alice Pattillo

Christmas falls at the coldest, darkest, most oppressive time of year in the northern hemisphere. For our ancestors, winter wasn't just cold and miserable, it was dangerous, and many people wouldn't make it through to the following summer. The freezing cold temperatures and lack of adequate insulation and heating, paired with viruses and plagues and lack of light and food, was a recipe for disaster. Life appeared to be at a standstill, with numerous life-giving, edible plants dying out and livestock having to be culled thanks to a lack of resources – it really was a hostile and miserable time of year. The real life fears of people during the Christmas season manifested themselves into midwinter folklore, full of terrifying beasts, frightening superstitions, and tales of dread, with the winter solstice a beacon of hope, when the days started to fight back and nights became shorter. Midwinter solstice represented death, rebirth, and in many pagan religions, marked a time when the veil between this world and the "other" was lifted. So while we might think of Christmas today as a cosy season of joy and merriment, it wasn't always that way.

If you think back to your childhood and hearing the nativity story, you will no doubt remember the very reason Mary and Jesus were forced into a barn to bring God's little bundle of joy into the world: Herod. The tale of the ghastly King Herod would probably get at least a PG13 rating for disturbing content and violence if it were ever to make it to Hollywood nowadays, yet it is the backbone of the entire Christmas story. When Herod gets word that God is sending a king in the form of a baby boy, Herod orders his men to slaughter every single male child two years old or younger in the whole of Bethlehem, an event known as the Massacre of the Innocents. It casts a pretty dark shadow over the joyous occasion that is the birth of Jesus, and thankfully none of Herod's guards managed to infiltrate the stable that was housing the son of God. The tale of Herod the child-killer is fictitious, however, and the real Herod was in fact a Romano-Jewish king of Judea. The biblical tale is likely negative anti-Semitic propaganda and unfortunately, the factual history of King Herod has become lost behind the myth. Herod remains the main antagonist of Christmas whether or not he actually earned the title. But he isn't the first Yuletide monster, despite being the most famous.

The winter gods and goddesses of pagan northern Europe all express the respectful but fearful relationship our ancestors had towards the season. The Scots-Irish goddess of winter, the Cailleach, was portrayed as a mournful old woman who strikes the ground with her giant staff, freezing the land. The Slavic goddess, Morana, is a similar winter deity who is heavily associated with death, and her effigy, Marzanna, is ritualistically drowned every spring. She also is associated with Mare, a malicious entity in Slavic and Germanic folklore and the personification of nightmares. In Finland, the witch goddess Louhi is said to have kidnapped the Sun and the Moon and held them captive in a mountain, causing the extended darkness of the winter season.

Myths and legends from all corners of the world tell tales of creatures that lurk in the dark of winter and are, in most cases, simply personifications of the most frightening aspects of the season. In Canada, the chenoo is a former human who has succumbed to cannibalism, perhaps thanks to the extreme weather conditions and lack of food available – they are then possessed by a spirit and their heart turns to ice. In Japan, the Yuki-onna is a beautiful woman who glides upon the snow freezing those caught in snow storms with her icy breath – a very literal ice maiden.

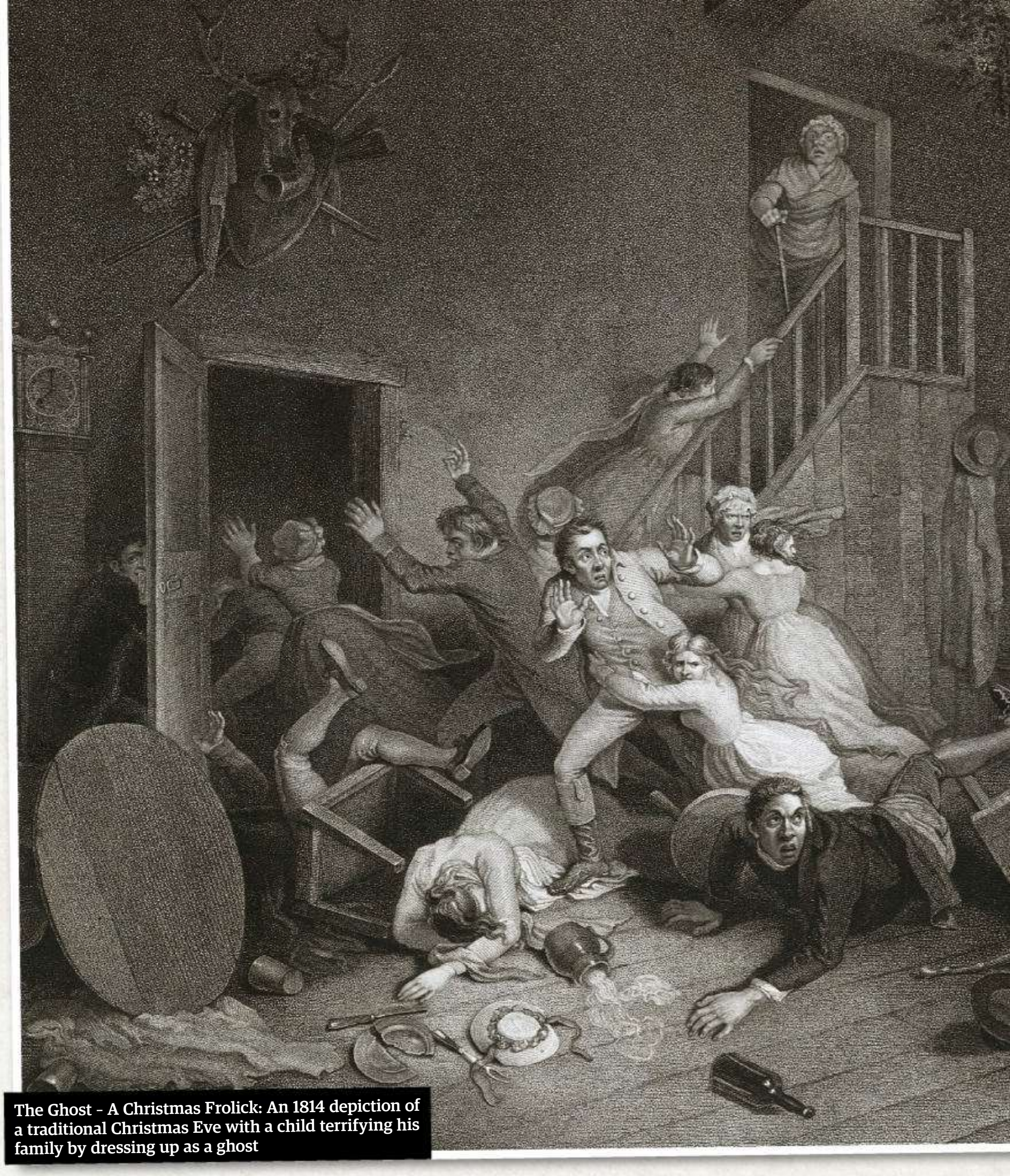
The Nuckelavee is a skinless Scottish demon who, after being imprisoned during the summer,

Ghosts of Christmas Past

Although scary stories are more commonly associated with Halloween today, ghost tales were a Victorian Christmas tradition. The most famous of all Yuletide ghost stories is, of course, *A Christmas Carol*, but sitting around the fireplace in midwinter and reciting fictional (or supposedly factual) accounts of hauntings was a common form of entertainment even before Charles Dickens cemented the link in his seminal novel. Folklore dating back to before the advent of Christianity is rife with tales of spirits and malevolent creatures spreading chaos at Christmas, and with the long nights and short days, it's a sinister time of year – perfect for spreading some Christmas fear! In 1589, Christopher Marlowe referenced the "spirits and ghosts" that defined the season in his play *The Jew of Malta*. In the 17th century, Robert Burton mentioned the Christmas tradition of telling "merry tales" of "witches, fairies". And in 1820, in the fifth installment of *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*, American author Washington Irving (known for his tale, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*) describes a Christmas evening of ghost tales. But thanks to the rise of the gothic novel and spiritualism, Dickens, a stream of other popular writers, and an audience with a taste for midwinter macabre, the tradition reached its peak during the Victorian era, and periodicals churned out Christmas specials chock full of terrifying tales of festive phantoms. However, with the rise of Halloween during the 20th century, spooky storytelling found a new home on 31 October, striking the last nail in the coffin of the age-old tradition of Yuletide ghost tales.

"A CHRISTMAS CAROL," A Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Picture

A scene from the 1938 film adaptation of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*

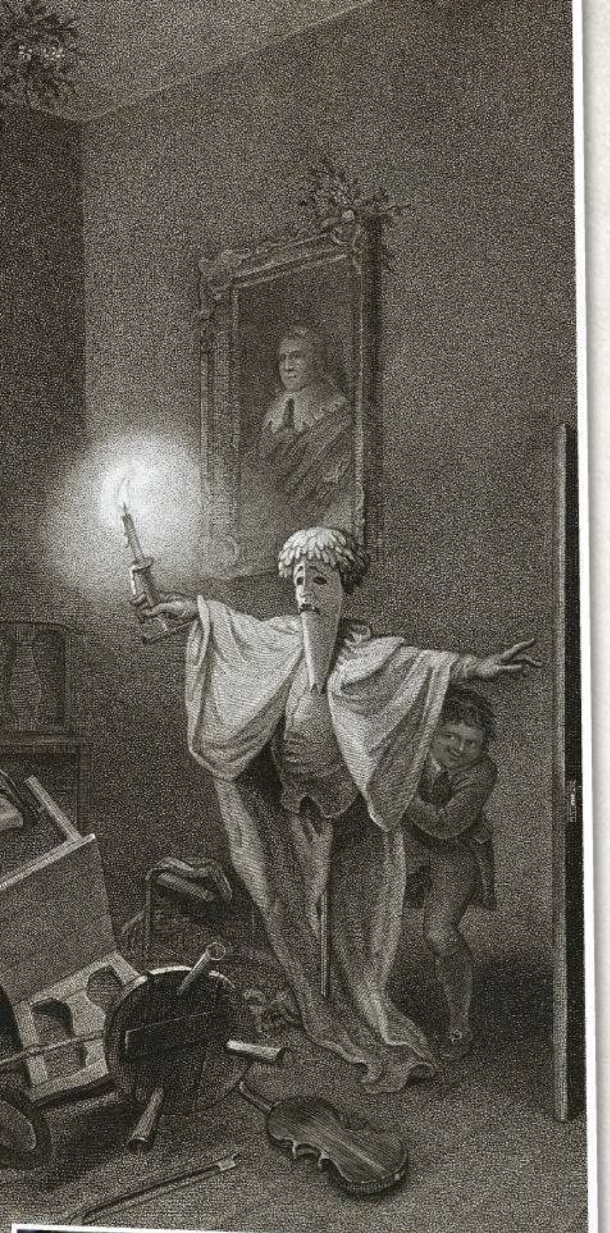


The Ghost – A Christmas Frolick: An 1814 depiction of a traditional Christmas Eve with a child terrifying his family by dressing up as a ghost

becomes a rage-infested ghoul hell-bent on causing suffering once freed by the cold.

The Norse winter solstice, Yule, was when the Wild Hunt rode, encouraging people to stay inside or else wind up having their soul collected by Odin and his team of hunters. The spirits of the dead were unleashed, along with other supernatural beings, such as trolls, so people burned yule logs to ward off evil and misfortune. In the heavily Norse-influenced Scottish islands of Orkney and Shetland, seven days before Yule is known as Tulya's E'en – the return of the dead. This day, usually 14 December, marked the beginning of a time when supernatural spirits were unleashed upon the earth. Trows, a form of sprite with magical powers that were greatest during the winter season, ordinarily resided in caves and mountains, often below ground. At Yuletide, however, they could run havoc upon the land and measures had to be taken in order to guard property and lives, as the trows' mischief could often end in death. Two pieces of straw were formed into a cross and left at the gate, and a hair was taken from each animal, plaited and hung by the stable door to ward off the trows from this day on. On Yule night itself, further steps were taken, with iron left in an unlocked door and a candle lit, hands and feet were washed in a bowl heated with three blazing pieces of peat or else "the trows would take the power from them", houses were tidied (trows hate a messy house) and brand new night clothes were worn.

Winter solstice for the Yupik of Alaska and Russia is particularly terrifying, with stories of underground monsters known as Kogukhpak, who are gigantic creatures with teeth and tusks like mammoths, big bulbous bodies and frog legs. They emerged from their subterranean homes at winter solstice to reign terror upon the world until the Sun returned, as the Sun was the only thing that could kill them. In southeast European and Anatolian folklore, hairy goblin-like creatures called the Kallikantzaros would arise from their underground habitat to wreak havoc and attempt to destroy the tree of life in order to kill humanity. Like the Kogukhpak, sunlight was fatal to them, but luckily they were also easily outwitted and couldn't count past three. In one tale, villagers



A Perchtan mask paraded as part of an annual gathering in Germany with the intention of scaring away evil spirits

were able to hold the troublesome beings at bay simply by putting colanders outside their doors. When the Kallikantzaros saw them, they spent the whole night attempting to count the holes until they had to retreat beneath ground before sunrise.

In Norway and Sweden, the eve of St Lucia's Day (the night of 12 December) was similar to our modern idea of Halloween. Dubbed Lussi's Night, it was believed that evil spirits and demons rose up to wander upon the Earth, under the guidance of Lussi – an ugly, tyrannical demon. Children were encouraged to be well-behaved and adults would protect their homes with a cross-shaped sigil. Lussi would ride through the sky on a broomstick and spread chaos, destroying crops and property, killing livestock and kidnapping or killing anyone who wasn't tucked up at home in bed. Similarly, in Germanic folklore, Lutzelfrau is supposedly another incarnation of St Lucia, but in this terrifying guise, she punishes lazy girls and disembowels naughty children.

For centuries folklore has told legends of altruistic beings such as Father Christmas and Saint Nick, the Italian good witch La Befana and the Finnish Yule Goat. But alongside these benevolent forces lie legends of more sinister folk who serve to punish those who are bad, and their punishments are often far more severe than a lump of coal left in your stocking.

One such Christmas monster is the Krampus of Alpine folklore, who has seen a surge in popularity in modern times thanks to Hollywood depictions. He serves as the antithesis of Saint Nikolaus (or Nicholas), and is often depicted visiting houses alongside him on Christmas Eve and assisting him with the children who have misbehaved. Krampus is represented as a Christmas devil, with horns, a forked tongue, a tail and cloven feet. Believed to be a pagan deity who was assimilated into the figure of the Christian devil in a similar fashion to Pan and other horned gods. While Saint Nick offers gifts such as oranges, dried fruits, chocolate and walnuts to well-behaved children, Krampus punished the bad by spanking them with birch rods, but that was by far the mildest of his disciplinary actions. In some vintage postcards, Krampus can be seen with a sack or basket, with which he presumably kidnaps children to eat, drown or transport to hell. Krampus is often shown to be accompanied by chains, which are thought to symbolise the binding of Lucifer by the church, and he often thrashes them for added scares – as if his ghastly appearance isn't terrifying enough.

> Scary Christmas legends are thought to represent the deadly nature of winter weather

Frau Perchta (or Bertha) is a Germanic and Alpine female figure who appears in two forms and is associated with the Germanic folklore figure Frau Holle, who is thought to be an ancient supreme goddess of Celtic origin. Holle dwells at the bottom of a well, rides a wagon, and teaches the craft of making linen from flax. Her spinning and weaving has associated her with witchcraft and she also is the goddess who oversees the death of children, appearing in two forms: as both a dark grandmother and a white lady. Her feast is in midwinter, during the 12 Days of Christmas, when the dead are said to roam abroad, and she is often said to be a leader of the Wild Hunt. As Perchta, she appears as either a beautiful white woman or a hideous hag, and often has one large goose or swan foot. Perchta checks that you have upheld the tradition of spinning all your flax by Twelfth Night and that your house is tidy. She roams the countryside at midwinter entering homes and leaving gifts of silver coins in the shoes or pails of those who had been good, ensuring luck for the year ahead. Those who had been naughty, or had failed to observe the correct rituals and traditional meal on Perchta's night, would have the rather brutal punishment of having their bellies split open and their guts replaced by straw and pebbles. In Austria, people still parade in costume as Perchta, donning masks known as Perchten, of either her beautiful or ugly form. Perchta in her beautiful form is said to bring luck and prosperity, while the ugly masks are to drive away evil spirits.

Another German figure of Christmas is Belsnickel, who by no means is as evil as Krampus or Perchta, but he's still fairly unsettling. In a similar fashion to the aforementioned dealers of Christmas justice, Belsnickel is a cantankerous old man who beats you if you have misbehaved. Dressed in rags and fur, Belsnickel sometimes supports a mask with a long tongue to conceal his identity and carries a switch in his hand to beat the disobedient. If you are good, however, he also has pockets full of cakes, sweets and nuts to hand out. He's a creepy character, often being "felt" before he is seen, and like Santa Claus or Father Christmas, adults would dress up as him for children. He remained a popular character in areas of the northwestern USA in the early 1800s, declining by the end of the 19th century.

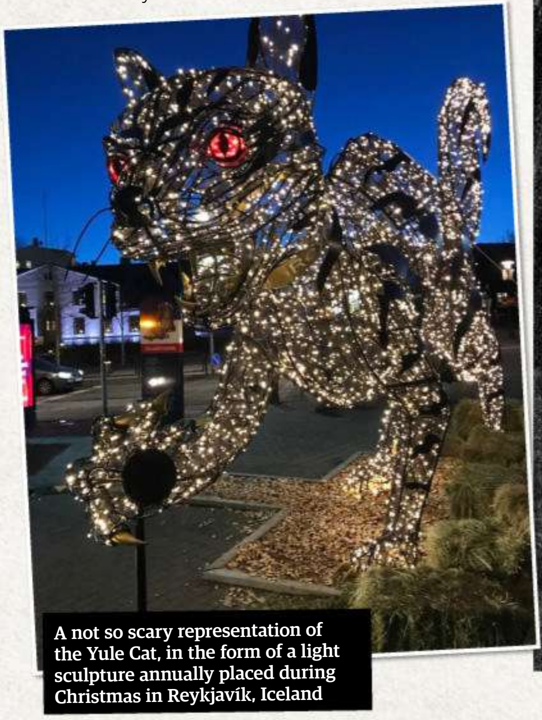
Perhaps the most terrifying of the fearsome Christmas figures who punish naughty children, however, is Hans Trapp, also known as the Christmas Scarecrow. One reason he is so terrifying is his origin story and the fact that he started out as an average human. The legend of Hans Trapp is based upon a real-life knight, named Hans von Trotha, who at two metres tall, was a rather imposing fellow. Trotha had some run-ins with an abbot, resulting in him being excommunicated by the Pope, and inadvertently caused a flood in Weissenburg; all this could have soured his reputation, and paired with his powerful stature gave inspiration to numerous tales of terror after his death, including one in the Palatinate region of Germany about a restless spirit dubbed the Black Knight. The tale of Hans Trapp, although entirely fictitious, is by far the most damning though. Trapp was said to have sold his soul to the devil in order to pursue a life of debauchery, wealth and power. After being banished to the woods or mountains, he became vengeful, his evil desires festered and his life of sin and use of black magic caused him to develop an insatiable desire for human flesh. One day he decided to disguise himself as a scarecrow by stuffing his clothing with straw, and wait alongside the road for a victim to eat. Unfortunately, a ten-year-old boy crosses his path and Hans stabs him, dragging him back to his lair, chopping him into pieces and roasting him for dinner. At this point, God noticed, and before he could take a bite, he is struck down by a bolt of lightning, splitting his head open and instantly killing him. That wasn't the end for Hans Trapp, though, and he is said to have accompanied Saint Nick in the French regions of Alsace and Lorraine to punish naughty children. In some versions of the myth, he marks children he'd like to eat on Christmas Eve, so you'd better be good – or else wind up as Hans Trapp's dinner.

For children in Iceland, where the winters are particularly harsh, so are their Christmastide legends. Rather than chestnuts roasting on an open fire, hanging stockings to be filled with gifts and tales of Santa Claus getting stuck in the chimney, Christmas in Iceland is a terrifying time when you must be on your best behaviour, as you'll be faced with not one, but many of the numerous monstrous figures of Icelandic folklore. As with most Christmas folklore, some of the characters might leave you a gift or two, but none of them are particularly friendly and any amount of naughtiness could result in being eaten.

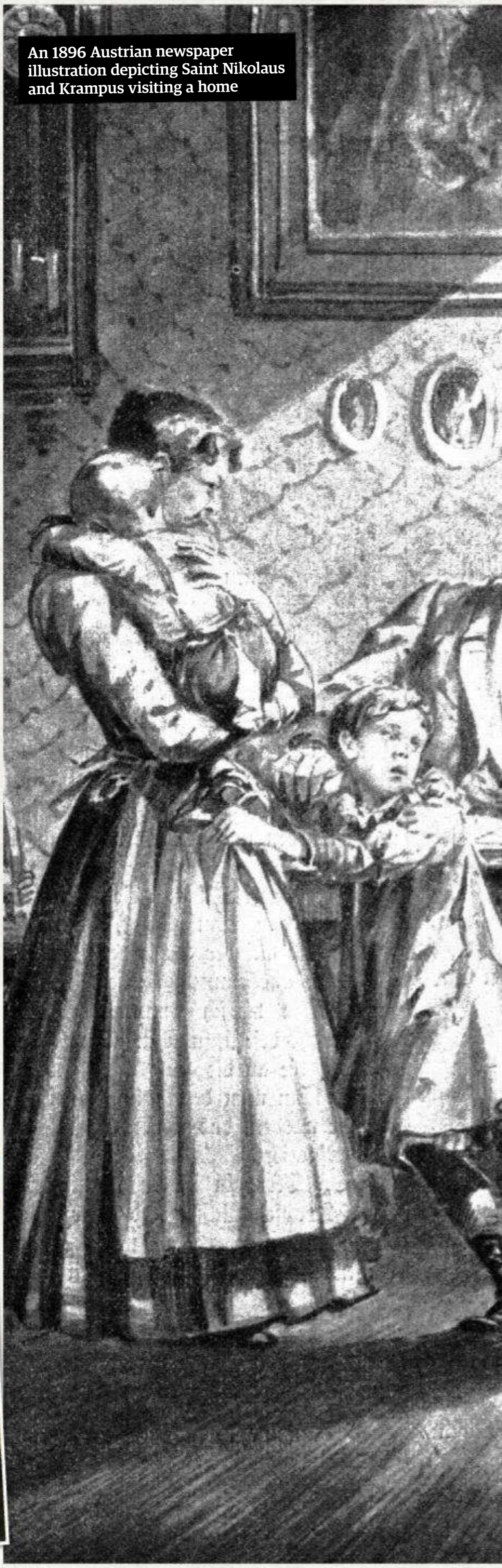
The characters of Icelandic Christmas folklore are all depicted as one (not-so) happy family and include Grylla the giantess and her husband Leppalúði, the Yule Cat and the Yule Lads. Grylla began life as a troll, according to the *Prose Edda*, but her relationship with Christmas was first mentioned in the 17th century. At Christmas time, she is said to leave her home in the Dimmuborgir mountains and go seeking food for her stew. Her favourite form of protein? Children. She delights in a stew of naughty children, but has been known to have one or two just as a snack too. Grylla, just like the omniscient Santa Claus or Frau Perchta, can detect whether a child has been good or bad, and will throw you in her giant sack to take back for the dinner she shares with her lazy third husband Leppalúði, if you've been misbehaving. She has also been known to eat a husband once she tires of him!

Unfortunately, Grylla has a lot of children, 13 of whom make up the Yule Lads. Each Yule Lad has a name that corresponds to a particular mischievous activity he likes to perform. Door-slammer likes to slam doors during the night to wake people up, Skyr-Gobbler will eat all your yogurt, Sausage-swiper will take your sausages, Spoon-licker only eats the remnants of food that's left on a spoon, and so on. Each Yule Lad is designated a day, so if you are a well-behaved child, the lads will leave you a treat for 13 days in a row, but if you've misbehaved, they will plant a rotten potato in your shoe every day for 13 days. The Yule Lads were apparently a lot more malevolent in the past, but in 1746 there was a ban on the terrifying tales of the Yule Lads, and at a time when hangings were still a form of entertainment across the world, it begs the question: How disturbing could they have been?

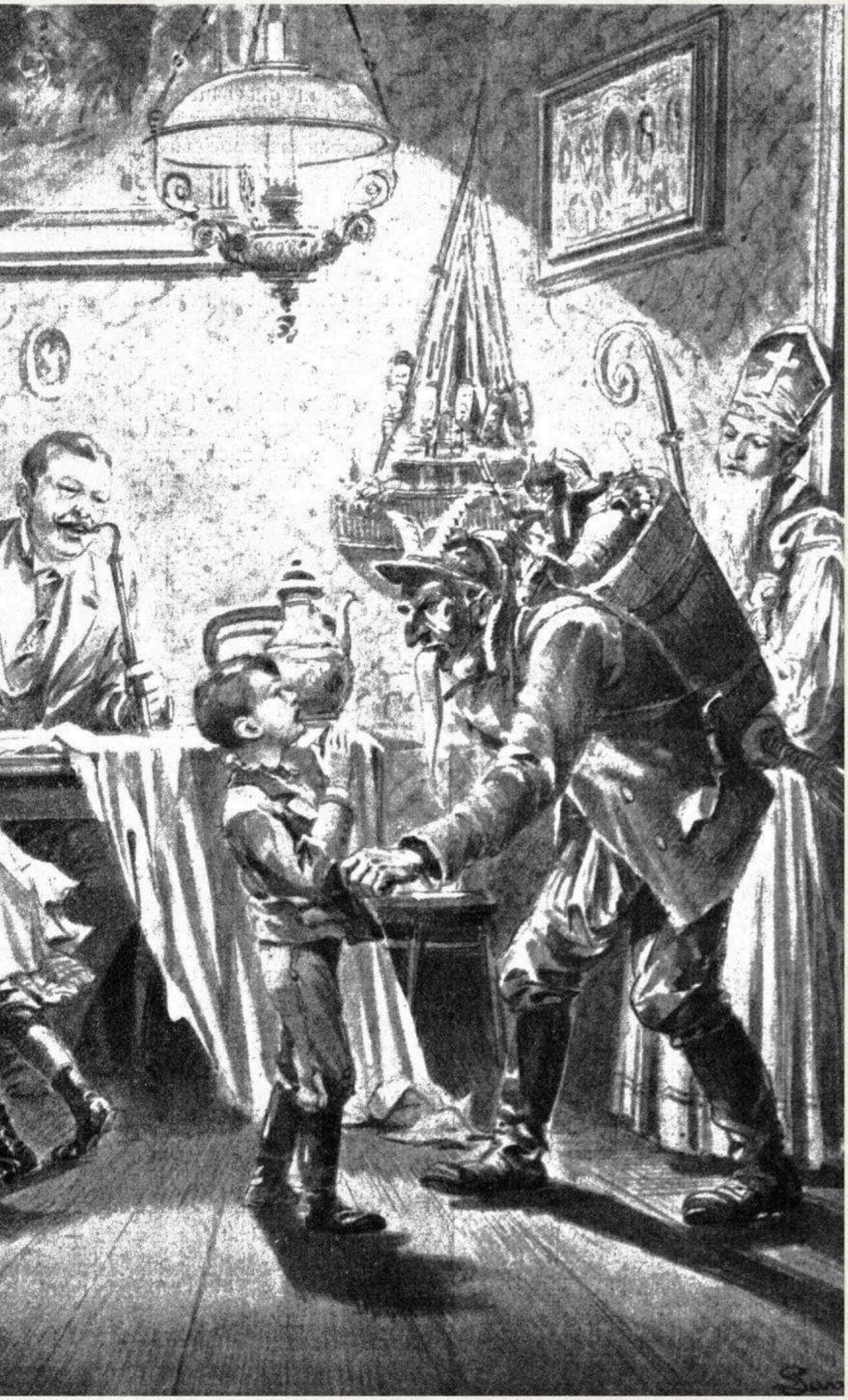
Saving the scariest member of Iceland's most frightening family of giants to last, the dreaded Yule Cat is the final member of Grylla's clan. A gigantic black cat known as Jólakötturinn first appeared in written folklore the 19th century, and sports razor-sharp whiskers, claws and teeth, and blazing eyes. It is likely the Yule Cat derives from legends of troll cats, often conjured up by witches and wizards in Scandinavian legend. The Yule Cat only awakes from its typical lazy feline slumber once a year – on Christmas Eve – and he eats children who didn't receive new clothes for Christmas. It's unclear how this one serves to teach children or scare them into submission, other than threatening not to buy your child some new threads perhaps and thus surrendering them to a fate of ending up as the Christmas kitty's next meal. A bit harsh.



A not so scary representation of the Yule Cat, in the form of a light sculpture annually placed during Christmas in Reykjavík, Iceland



An 1896 Austrian newspaper illustration depicting Saint Nikolaus and Krampus visiting a home



Seasonal shapeshifting

All the creatures that are associated with Halloween now were linked to the winter solstice and Christmas in days gone by… witches, ghosts and even werewolves! Being born on Christmas Day could reportedly make you a werewolf. In Poland and elsewhere in northeastern Europe, babies born at Christmas are said to have a greater chance of being a werewolf, and steps were to be taken to prevent such an occurrence. The myth is depicted in the 1961 Universal film, *The Curse of the Werewolf*, with Oliver Reed's Leon suffering the werewolf curse despite his mother being a victim of rape and himself being an orphan. In Germany, it wasn't just being born on Christmas Day itself that would increase your chances of lycanthropy, your likelihood was automatically enlarged if you entered the world on any day within the 12 days of Christmas. Similarly, in Italy, being born on the winter solstice meant you were likely to be a shapeshifter. The reason? Blasphemy. Being born on Jesus' birthday was the ultimate insult to God. According to 15th century Swedish traveller and writer Olaus Magnus, in Prussia, Livonia and Lithuania, Christmas night was the annual party night for werewolves, after which they would be left fired up and ready to charge up to houses, bash down doors, and feast on humans and their pets or livestock. Happy Christmas!

Folklore from Italy, Germany and Poland states that someone born at Christmas had a high chance of becoming a werewolf

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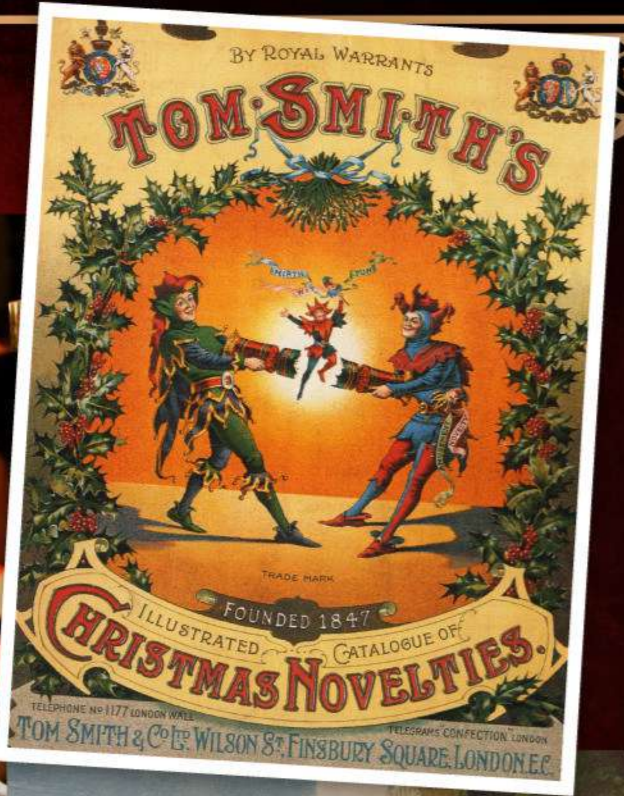
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Today, many people make their own advent calendars and fill them with all sorts of treats

20
8
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Advent Calendars

The excitement of the countdown to Christmas started as a religious observance but is now focused on 24 little treats...

Written by Katharine Marsh

All around the world, people count down to Christmas from 1 December by opening a little numbered door every day. But where did this tradition actually come from?

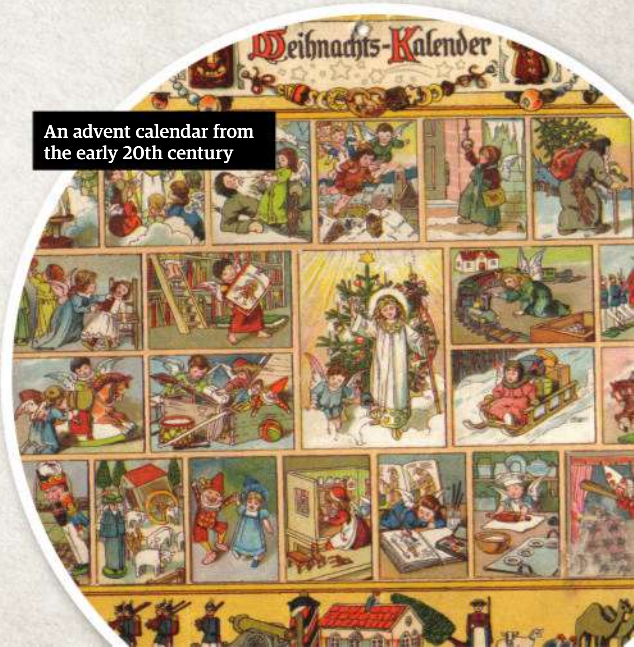
One theory is that it came from 19th century Germany, when Lutherans would mark every day from 1 to 24 December with a chalk line on a door. Eventually, German bookshop owner Gerhard Lang realised there was money to be made and began selling calendars counting down the days to Christmas. But it was in 1902 that the real money maker was created – Lang's mother attached 24 biscuits onto a square of cardboard for her son to eat each day in the lead-up to the festivities. In 1908, Lang stole his mother's idea and put the calendars in his shop, but changed it slightly – instead of sweet treats, little pictures were hidden behind the calendar doors.

Needless to say, the idea caught on. While Lang closed up shop in 1930, advent calendars had become popular. Some sold ones with little pictures, others sold ones with biblical verses. They were banned, however, in 1940s Germany – the Nazis called them 'pre-Christmas calendars' and replaced the images and biblical verses with swastikas. But after World War II, they made a resurgence and spread around the world.

Chocolate advent calendars – staples of today's Christmas celebrations in the Western world – began to appear on shop shelves in the late 1950s, but they weren't popular at first. Cadbury even started making them in 1971, but it would take another two decades before they were put into continuous production.

President Eisenhower had a part to play in the popularisation of the advent calendar in the United States. He was pictured opening them with his grandchildren, creating interest in the product.

Advent calendars (particularly chocolate ones, or those holding other treats and goodies) have now become commonplace. Every year, companies strive to create more innovative versions, with makeup, candles, tea, coffee and more. In 2007, Harrods broke the record for the most expensive advent calendar with a four-foot, Christmas-tree-shaped carved wooden structure that cost a whopping £30,000. Meanwhile the largest advent calendar ever created was at St Pancras Station in London in 2007, measuring in at 71 metres high and 23 metres wide.



An advent calendar from the early 20th century

St Lucia's Day

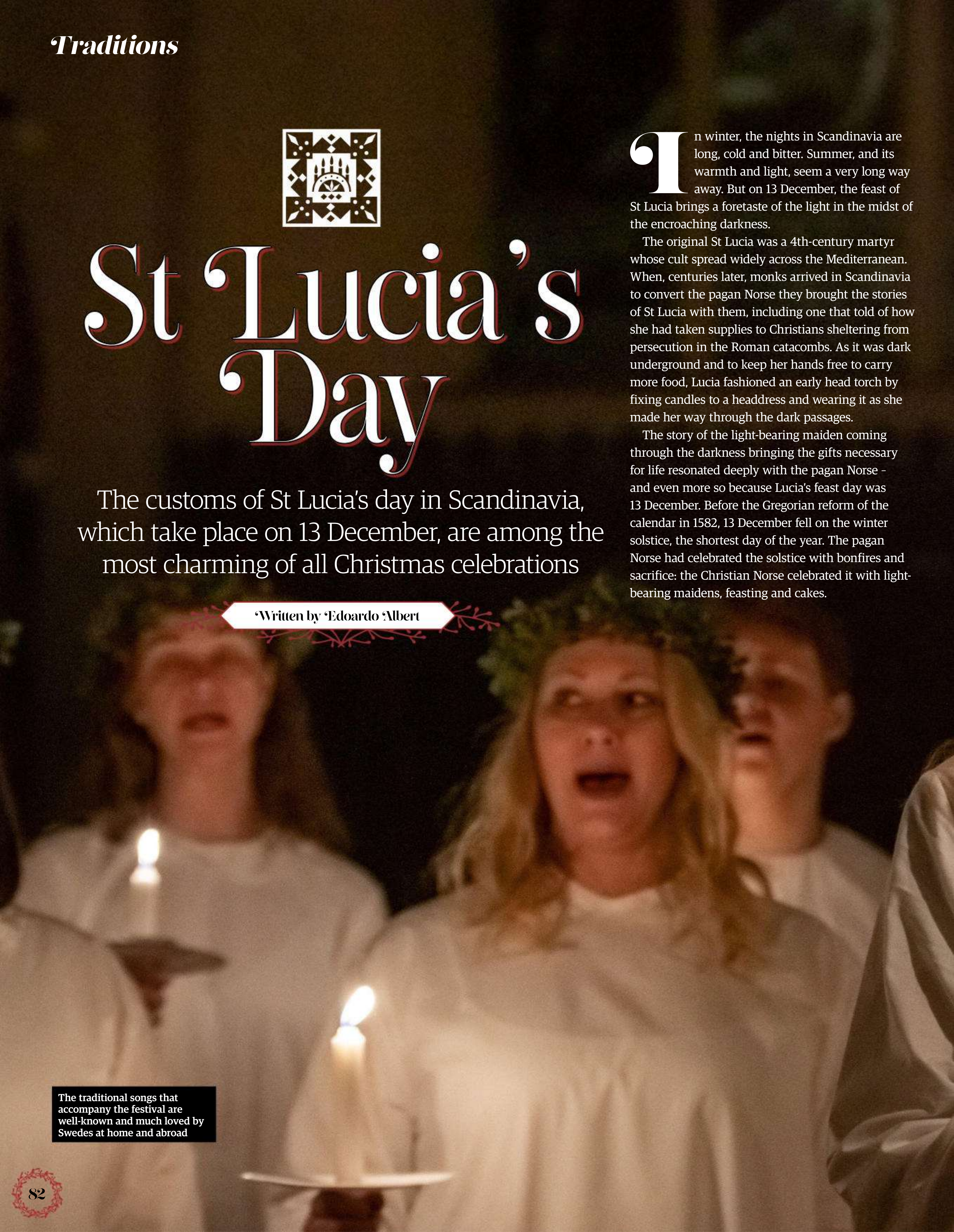
The customs of St Lucia's day in Scandinavia, which take place on 13 December, are among the most charming of all Christmas celebrations

Written by Edoardo Albert

In winter, the nights in Scandinavia are long, cold and bitter. Summer, and its warmth and light, seem a very long way away. But on 13 December, the feast of St Lucia brings a foretaste of the light in the midst of the encroaching darkness.

The original St Lucia was a 4th-century martyr whose cult spread widely across the Mediterranean. When, centuries later, monks arrived in Scandinavia to convert the pagan Norse they brought the stories of St Lucia with them, including one that told of how she had taken supplies to Christians sheltering from persecution in the Roman catacombs. As it was dark underground and to keep her hands free to carry more food, Lucia fashioned an early head torch by fixing candles to a headdress and wearing it as she made her way through the dark passages.

The story of the light-bearing maiden coming through the darkness bringing the gifts necessary for life resonated deeply with the pagan Norse – and even more so because Lucia's feast day was 13 December. Before the Gregorian reform of the calendar in 1582, 13 December fell on the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. The pagan Norse had celebrated the solstice with bonfires and sacrifice: the Christian Norse celebrated it with light-bearing maidens, feasting and cakes.

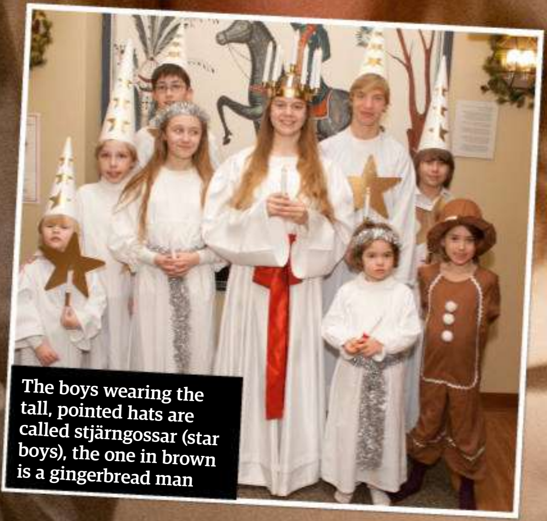


The traditional songs that accompany the festival are well-known and much loved by Swedes at home and abroad

Today, towns and schools throughout Sweden and the rest of Scandinavia celebrate the festival by electing – usually by lot – a young girl to be St Lucia for the day. The St Lucia stand-in for the year wears white robes and lights in her hair, battery powered or traditional candles. She leads a procession of similarly white-clad girls and young women through the streets as they sing traditional songs while carrying candles. Boys take part in the procession as well, joining in with the singing. Some of the boys wear white while others take the part of other people and creatures associated with Christmas, ranging from St Stephen to nisse. The nisse are creatures from Scandinavian folklore who resemble gnomes and are associated with Christmas and the winter solstice.

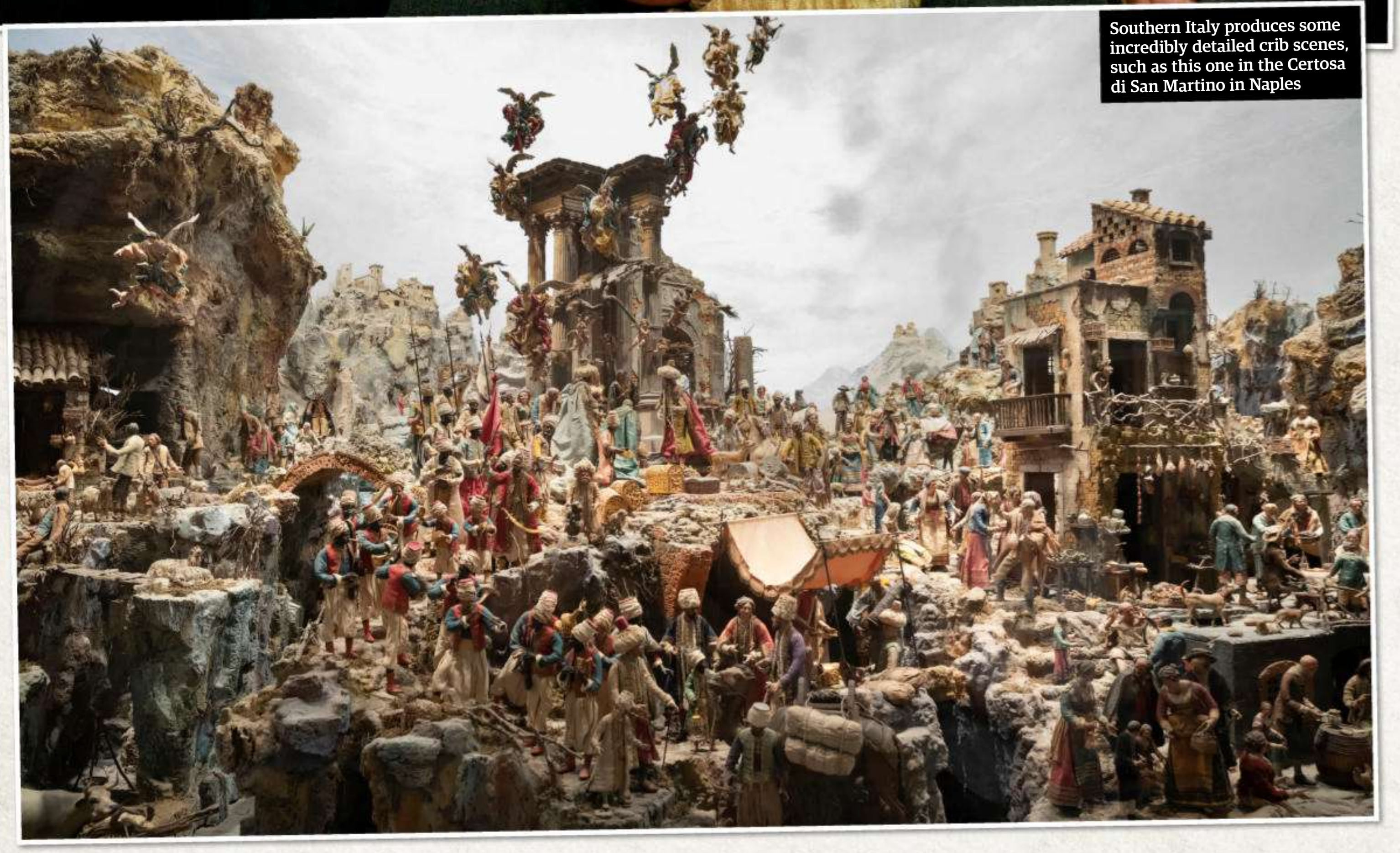
The traditional songs sung in the procession are part of the common inheritance of Swedes and almost all Swedes can sing them, although not always very tunefully.

The feast is not solely public. Within the family, it is traditional for the eldest daughter, also dressed in white, to serve the rest of the family cakes, pastries and coffee, in particular ginger snaps and lussekatter, a type of saffron bread that looks like a curled-up cat. The original Lucia might have been surprised, but no doubt delighted, to learn how what she did in the warm south endures in the cold north.



The boys wearing the tall, pointed hats are called stjärngossar (star boys), the one in brown is a gingerbread man

The nativity play only became associated with primary schools in Britain following World War I but it has already became a favourite tradition



Southern Italy produces some incredibly detailed crib scenes, such as this one in the Certosa di San Martino in Naples

Who is Mary?

How the nativity play became one of the most beloved parts of going to primary school in Britain

Written by Edoardo Albert

According to St Francis' biographer, the friar from Assisi was the first man to stage a nativity play – although a nativity tableau might be a better description. In 1223, Francis preached to the villagers of Grecio in Italy on the baby of Bethlehem. To bring the scene more vividly to life, Francis had previously put a manger in a cave, with an ox and an ass in attendance, and when he came to preach he showed the villagers this representation of the nativity.

It's a fine story, but historians are dubious as to its veracity. Nor is it entirely clear whether the papal permission that Francis received to stage this tableau included people playing any of the human, angelic and divine characters in the scene.

But if Francis' status as the director of the first nativity play is not proven, what is definite is that by the 9th century there were already partial representations of the events of Easter during the liturgies of Holy Week. By the 11th and 12th centuries, these had become much more elaborate and had broadened to include the shepherds seeking the infant Jesus, who would be revealed by a curtain being drawn back to show a crib containing a model of the infant Jesus.

These first religious dramas took place within churches but as the plays became more elaborate they moved outdoors, first to the cemetery around the church and then to other public areas. With the move outside, the stories grew further, evolving into the great medieval mystery plays that were the precursors of Tudor and Jacobean theatre. By the early 17th century, elaborate nativity scenes were set up in Germany, and the custom spread to other European countries. In Catalonia, the caganer, a young lad opening his bowels, became a customary part of nativity dioramas.

Meanwhile, in northern Europe the iconoclasm of the Reformation lead to the suppression of mystery plays. Indeed, during the Commonwealth, all theatres were closed in England. However, the Victorian reimaging of Christmas as a family festival began to cement the idea of children playing grown-up roles in home-based nativity tableaux. The association of nativity plays with primary schools in the UK began in the decades following World War I. With religious education a requirement of all schools, whether state or religious, teachers discovered that staging a nativity play served to convey the understanding of Christianity that they were mandated to teach. By the 1970s, nativity plays had become an apparently ancient tradition although, in their modern form, they are comparatively recent. Cancelled during the Covid-19 pandemic, nativity plays across the country tentatively restarted in 2021. The coming years will no doubt see many more staged, to the delight of children, parents and grandparents around the country.

Some schools even enlist baby siblings to play the part of the infant Jesus

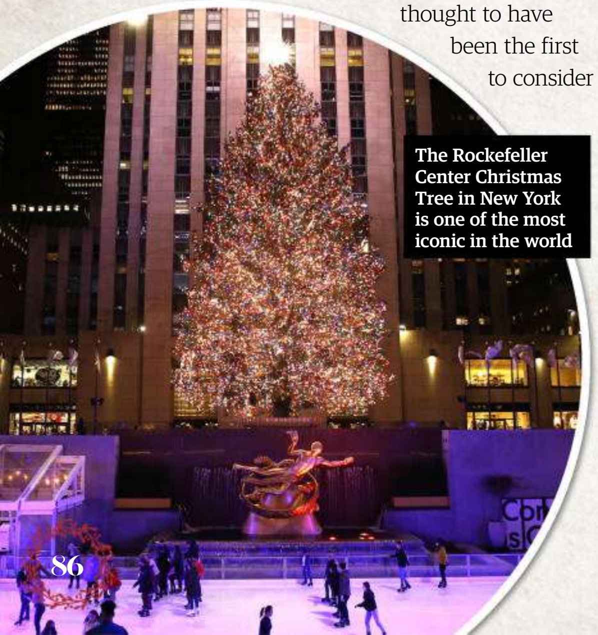
Christmas Trees

Bringing evergreens into our homes is one of the oldest Christmas traditions

Written by Jessica Leggett

The tradition of bringing evergreens into the home during the winter solstice dates all the way back to ancient Egypt and Rome. Evergreens were highly symbolic and were thought to symbolise the triumph of life over death and the expectation of another spring. They were also thought to guard the house and ward off evil spirits.

The tradition of the Christmas tree, as we recognise it today, originated in 16th century Germany, where families would decorate evergreen trees on Christmas Eve. Martin Luther, a German Protestant reformer, is typically given credit for starting this tradition because he is thought to have been the first to consider decorating a tree for Christmas. According to the legend, Luther was making his way home one night when he turned to look up and was awed by the beauty of the night sky, which was framed by evergreen trees. Luther brought a tree back to his house and decorated it with lit candles because he had been moved by the scene and wanted to recreate it for his family.

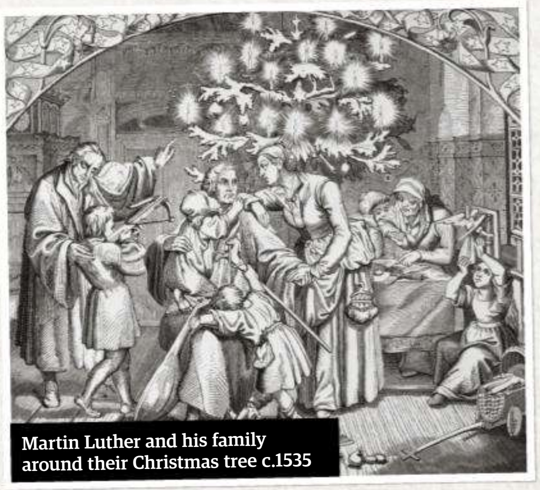


The Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree in New York is one of the most iconic in the world

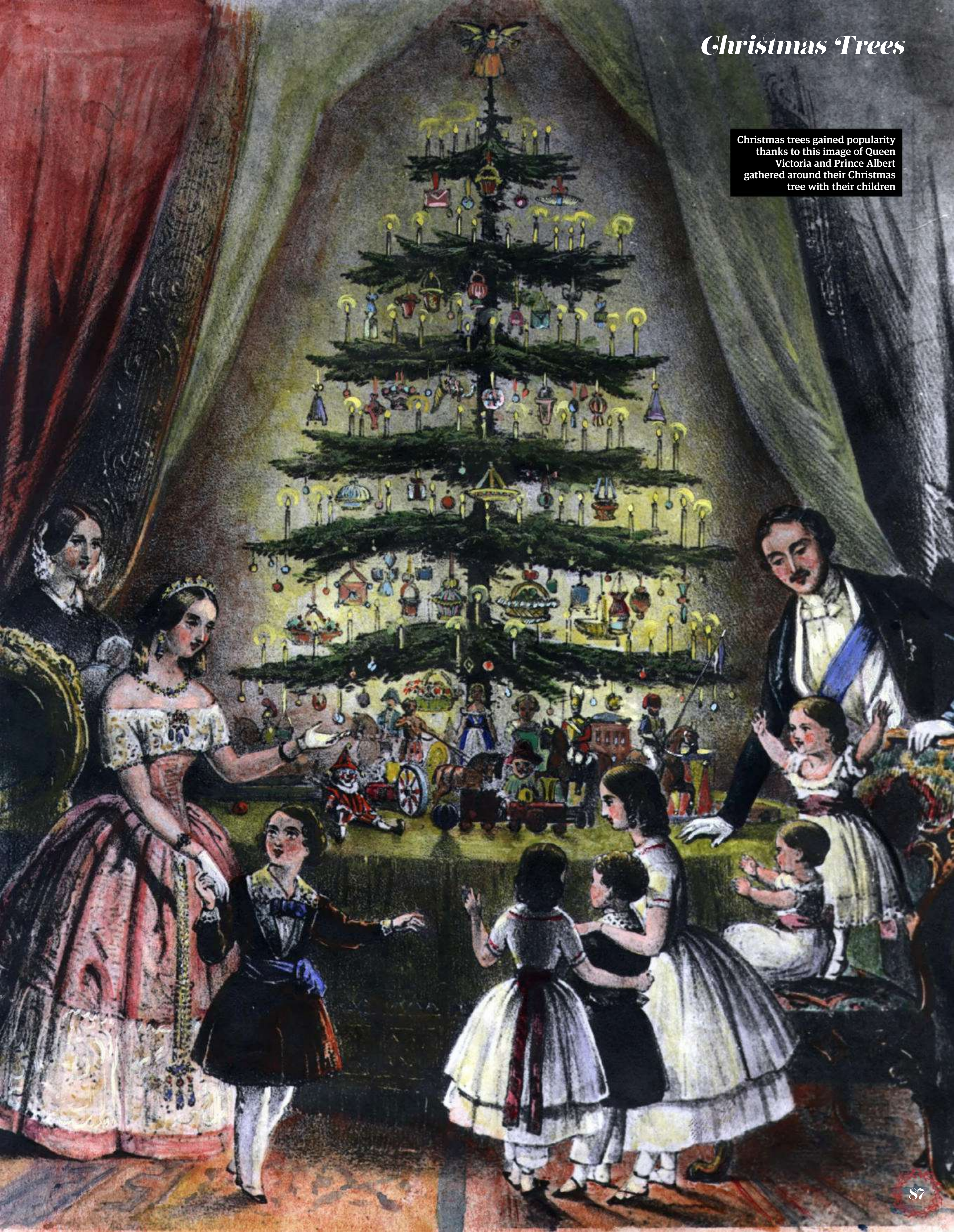
It is generally accepted that Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband, was responsible for establishing the Christmas tree tradition in Britain. This is a common misconception, though, as Queen Charlotte, King George III's German wife, introduced the first Christmas tree to Britain four decades before Prince Albert. After marrying George in 1761, Charlotte brought many of her German customs with her to Britain, and Christmas became a more public affair for the royals. The installation of her first Christmas tree at Queen's Lodge in Winsdor, which was decked out with tinsel, candies, and candles, sparked a new tradition among the nobility.

It has been claimed that Queen Victoria loved Christmas trees as a child, proving that her husband was not the one who brought them to Britain. However, Christmas trees didn't become a popular tradition outside of the upper classes until images of Victoria, Albert, and the rest of the royal family gathered around their tree appeared in periodicals like the *Illustrated London News*, which helped the practice catch on all over the nation. These images also helped Christmas trees become more popular in the United States, where they had previously been largely shunned due to the perception that they were associated with pagan rituals.

Today, Christmas trees are an indisputable part of the festive season, with decorated trees in homes and public spaces all around the world. Some of the most famous Christmas trees include the Trafalgar Square Christmas Tree in London, a tree that has been annually gifted to the people of Britain by Norway since 1947, and the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree in New York City.

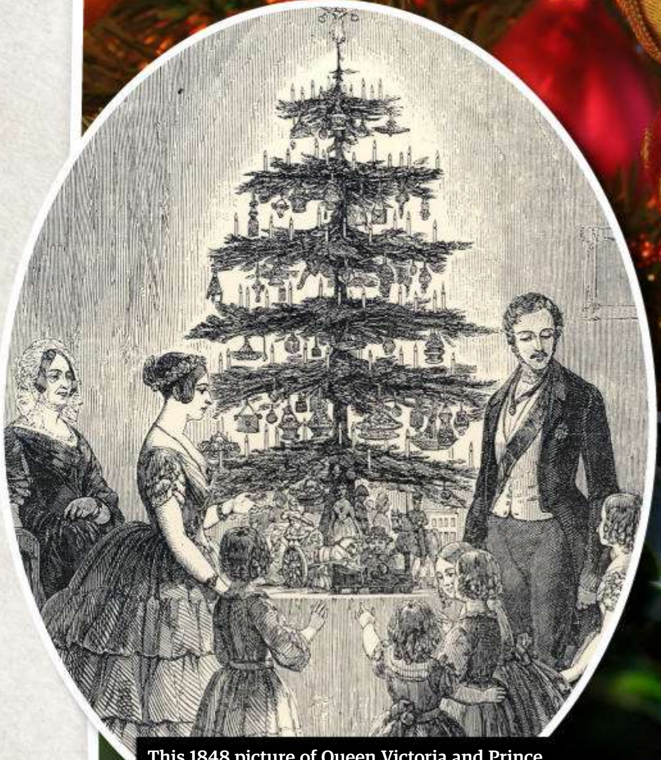


Martin Luther and his family around their Christmas tree c.1535



Christmas trees gained popularity thanks to this image of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert gathered around their Christmas tree with their children

While Christmas trees go back at least five hundred years, the baubles and tinsel that decorate them date to the mid-19th century



This 1848 picture of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert with their children around a Christmas tree popularised the German tradition of dressing a Christmas tree in the English-speaking world

Evergreen plants such as holly and ivy were the very first forms of Christmas decoration, symbolising new life at the darkest part of the year

Baubles, Tinsel and Holly

How we came to decorate our homes at Christmas

Written by Edoardo Albert

The use of greenery to adorn church and home at Christmas is very old. Almost all the church records from the Middle Ages show entries recording the purchase of ivy and holly for decorations at Christmas. While we don't have similar records for private homes, by 1444 one chronicler says of London that 'every man's house and also his parish church was decked with holme, ivie, bayes, and whatever the season of the year afforded to be green.' The first mention of *Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly* is from 16th century Wales, indicating that holly continued to be a common domestic Christmas decoration.

Advent wreaths were probably first wound in Germany in the 16th century by Lutherans, but the first unambiguous historical record of their use is much later: 1833. The 19th century was also when advent wreaths were first hung on front doors to welcome visitors to the house.

The first Christmas trees were decorated in Germany. In 1419, in Freiburg, a document records a tree hung with gingerbread, apples, wafers and what may have been an early form of tinsel, in the city's hospital. By the early 16th century erecting a Christmas tree had become so popular in Germany that laws had to be passed to stop people chopping down too many trees.

The first decorations hung from Christmas trees were mainly edible: dried fruit, biscuits, gingerbread, even turnips. The first lights attached to the tree were candles and a sort of early tea light made from a nutshell filled with oil. Not surprisingly, these decorations were a significant fire hazard. Starting in the 19th century, people began to decorate their trees with people and symbols of Christmas: angels, the star, even the Baby Jesus.

Christmas trees remained largely a German custom until the mid-19th century when German emigré Prince Albert was pictured with his wife, Queen Victoria, and their children around a highly decorated Christmas tree. With pictures of the Royal Family gathered around their tree appearing annually in the magazines of the day, a decorated Christmas tree rapidly became a feature of the Victorian family Christmas in Britain and America, and then worldwide. As for the glass baubles hung from the Christmas tree, they were a German invention too. When FW Woolworth was on a buying trip to Europe in the 1890s he saw these glass baubles for sale and started importing them to America to sell in his Woolworths stores. Tinsel was also from Germany, although it was developed by French Huguenot exiles. As metalworkers, they sometimes had leftover shavings which they twisted to make the first tinsel. When it became popular as a decoration, they started to make it from sheets of tin foil and it quickly became associated with Christmas baubles. And so modern-Christmas decorations were born.

MERRY CHRISTMAS

From Fire Hazard to Fairy Light

During the darkest days of the year, Christmas lights bring welcome illumination

Written by Edoardo Albert

From Fire Hazard to Fairy Light

The first Christmas lights were as much fire hazard as festive illumination. In Germany, where the tradition of decorating Christmas trees began, people pinned candles to their tree. This was a difficult procedure involving pushing the heated pin into the base of the candle and then pinning it to the tree. Other people half-filled an empty nutshell with oil, put a wick in the oil and hung that from the tree.

Whichever form of Christmas light people used, sensible families made sure to keep a bucket of water by the tree in case it caught fire. It took the invention of electricity and electric lights for Christmas lighting to take off - although one American inventor in the 1870s did produce a cast-iron simulation Christmas tree that was lit by gas.

It was another American, Edward H Johnson, who invented electric Christmas tree lights. Johnson was a partner of Thomas Edison, the inventor of the light bulb, and on 22 December 1872 he strung 80 red, white and blue light bulbs on to the tree he had set up in his parlour looking out over Fifth Avenue. Passers by stopped to stare at the wonder. Johnson, a consummate publicist, also invited the press to see his tree.

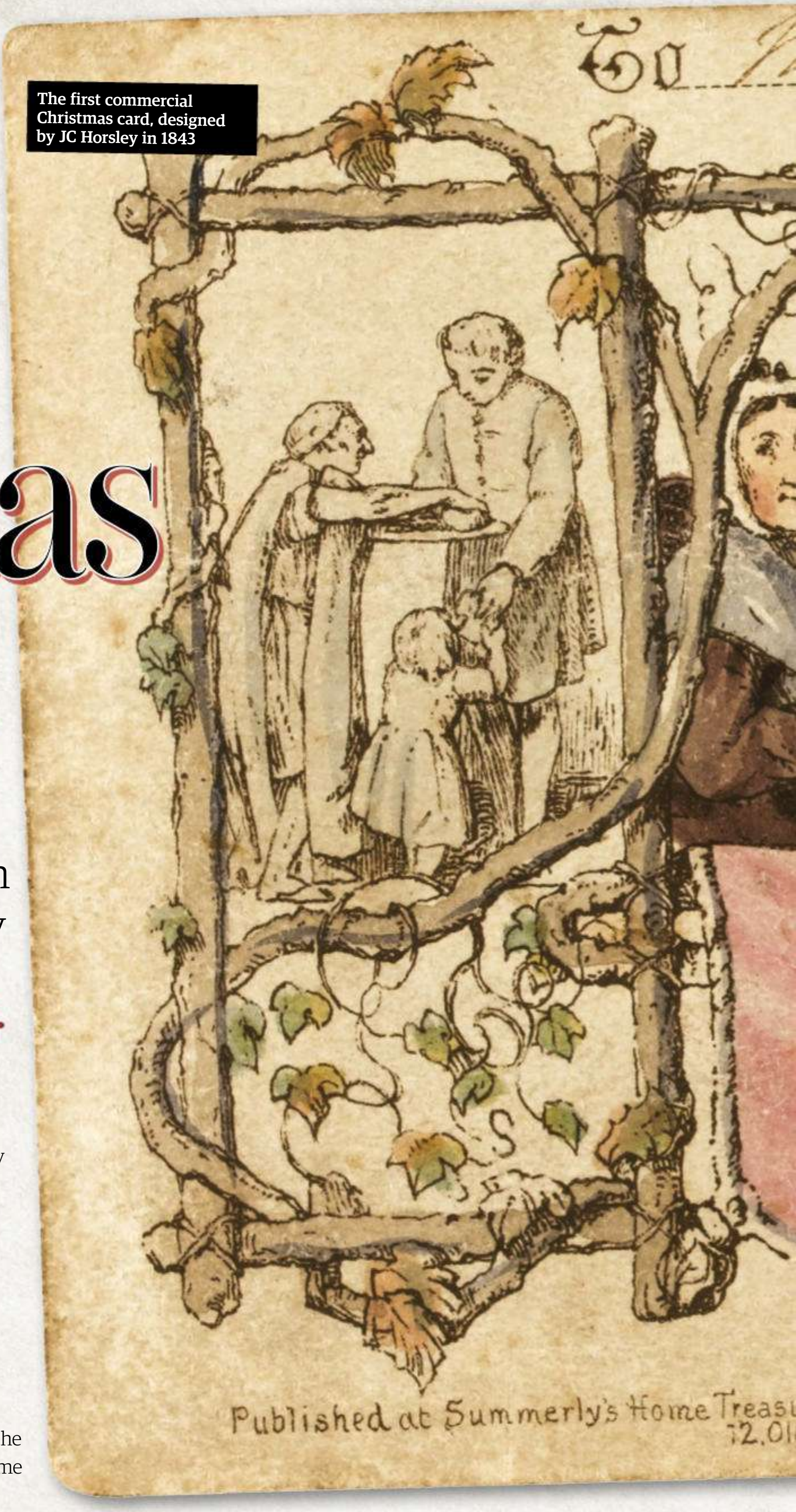
Johnson turned his invention into a tradition, erecting a new tree with more lights each year. The lights, however, were expensive, far beyond the reach of ordinary people. But by 1895 the practice had spread to the highest in the land: President Grover Cleveland unveiled the first illuminated Christmas tree at the White House. Christmas trees lit by electric lights spread widely through America in the years following, but it was only in the 1920s that the General Electric Company started producing Christmas lights at a price within the budget of ordinary families.

Outdoor illuminations required electric light bulbs that could safely weather rain and snow. The first recorded set of outdoor Christmas illuminations lit up Santa Rosa Avenue (subsequently known as Christmas Tree Lane) in Altadena, California, in 1920. The street has been lit up at Christmas every year since except during World War II. Regent Street in London was first lit up for the Christmas of 1954 with Oxford Street following in 1959. The practise has spread to non-Christian countries too, providing a welcome burst of light in midwinter.

With the introduction of LED lights in the 2000s, ever more elaborate lighting displays have become common, with light sculptures the new trend. The largest displays can consist of thousands of lights and require their own generator. Indeed, during December, six per cent of America's electricity consumption goes to powering Christmas lights. It's all come a long way from a couple of candles, flickering on a tree.

SANTA'S WORKSHOP

Every neighbourhood has the household that really goes to town with their Christmas lights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The first commercial Christmas card, designed by JC Horsley in 1843

Christmas Cards

Festive greeting cards revolutionised the way we wish our loved ones a happy holiday

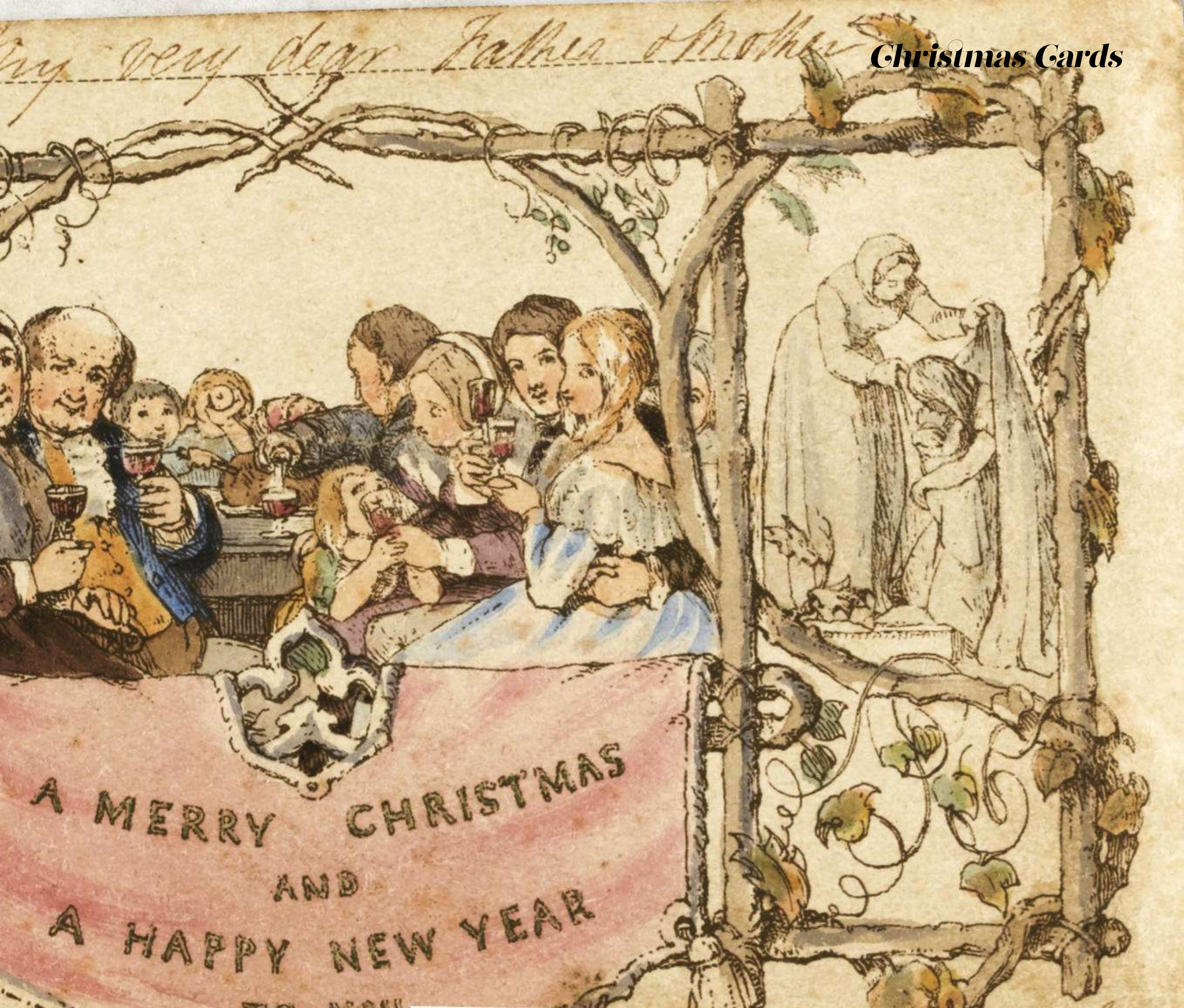
Written by Jessica Leggett

Christmas cards are a beloved staple of the festive season. The world's first known Christmas card was reportedly sent to King James I and his son, the Prince of Wales, by German physician Michael Maier, in 1611. However, it was over two centuries later, in 1843, when the first commercial Christmas card was commissioned by Sir Henry Cole, the first director of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

Cole wanted to find a quick and easy way to send festive greetings to all of his loved ones. He developed the idea of a Christmas card and asked his friend, illustrator John Callcott Horsley, to design it for him. Horsley illustrated a domestic scene with a family gathered around their table celebrating Christmas, with scenes of charity depicted on either side.

Cole had a thousand copies of this card printed in London. Each one was hand-coloured with a generic message inside, so all Cole had left to do was add the addressee's name at the top and sign his name at the bottom. He decided to sell the cards that he had not used for one shilling each, which was expensive at the time and so was not a commercial success. However, many of his friends realised that these cards were a clever way to save time and over the next few years, several of them began sending out their own copies of Cole and Horsley's original. Although it would take a while for the Christmas card to become more widespread in Britain, it eventually became a beloved tradition and the cards became valued keepsakes among the middle class.

New Christmas card designs were released throughout the late 19th century, with designs created by famous illustrators such as Henry Payne and Linnie Watts. During the time, Christmas card designs varied and included themes such as animals, children, religion, flowers, dancing and celebrating. Eventually, the popularity of Christmas cards crossed the Atlantic to the United States. Printer and lithographer Louis Prang was already creating festive greeting cards and exporting them to Britain when he decided to start producing them for the United States in 1875. Prang had made Christmas cards more affordable for people to buy by mass producing them from his factory in Boston, and by the 1880s, Prang was printing more than five million cards annually. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Prang is regarded as "the father of the American Christmas card" in history.


My very dear Father & Mother
A MERRY CHRISTMAS AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR TO YOU
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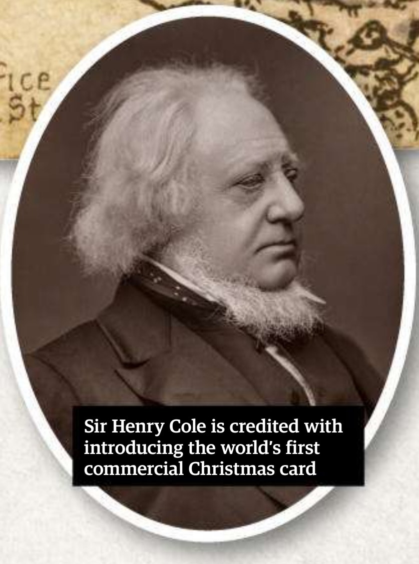
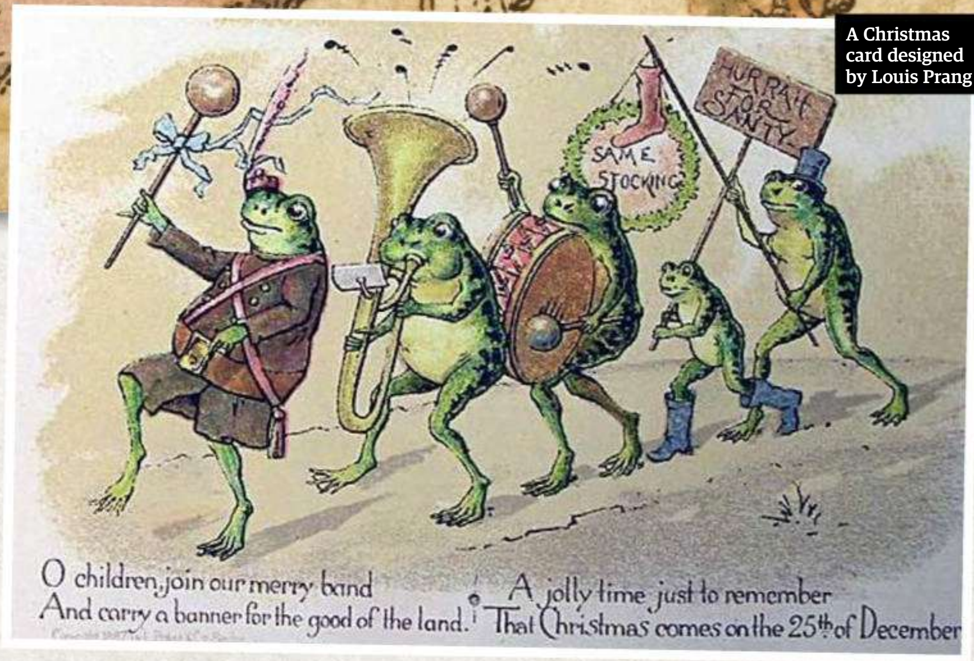


Sir Henry Cole is credited with introducing the world's first commercial Christmas card

A Christmas card designed by Louis Prang


HURRAH FOR SANITY
SAME STOCKING
O children, join our merry band
And carry a banner for the good of the land.
A jolly time just to remember
That Christmas comes on the 25th of December

Children also take part in Las Posadas processions, often dressed as angels or shepherds

Lechón, roast suckling pig, is the traditional Noche Buena meal in the Philippines

The Good Night

The Christmas traditions of Spain, Latin America and the Philippines concentrate on the night of Christ's birth, Christmas Eve

Written by Edoardo Albert

Advent, the four weeks before Christmas, are, like Lent, a time of preparation. Although difficult to discern today amid Christmas sales and office parties, advent is also supposed to be a time of fasting. In previous centuries, when this fasting was more rigorously observed, the first chance to properly eat was after attending Midnight Mass. By tradition, Jesus was born at midnight as Christmas Eve became Christmas Day. Midnight Mass was timed to commemorate this.

Mass said, the church's liturgical calendar moved from fasting to feasting. In Spain, Latin America and the Philippines, the tradition of Noche Buena developed as a result of this cycle of fast and feast. For hard-working peasant farmers returning home after Midnight Mass - called la Misa del Gallo or the Mass of the Rooster in Spanish - this was the first chance to eat properly after the strict fast of the previous week. So the custom developed to prepare the food and then eat with all the family in the early hours of Christmas morning.

Noche Buena means the Good Night. As the festival developed, it spilled over into the earlier parts of Christmas Eve. All the generations of the family gathered together and, as the rigour of advent has eased, some families moved the custom of eating together to the night of Christmas Eve. To commemorate the long journey of the pregnant Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, some Latin American countries have celebrations called Las Posadas in the days leading up to Noche Buena. Las Posadas means the inns or the lodgings, recalling the places where Mary and Joseph looked for somewhere to stay, and the celebrations involve an outdoor procession during which people sing villancios, holiday songs, and make piñatas.

Noche Buena itself usually also involves singing and dancing, with bands and speakers playing merengue, bomba and salsa and the celebrations continuing through the night.

The food eaten at the big family feast is a central part of Noche Buena, although what people eat depends upon the local cuisine. In Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines, lechón, roasted pig, is traditional. For Mexicans, the Noche Buena meal often includes tamales, pozole (a traditional stew) and pavo (turkey). In the mother country, Spain, soup and seafood are the traditional dishes for Noche Buena with turrón as dessert. Turrón is a nougat made of honey, sugar, egg whites and roasted nuts. The Colombians prefer a traditional potato soup called ajiaco Bogotano and natilla, a dessert made from milk and corn starch.

Wherever Noche Buena is celebrated, it is a night filled with food, family, fellowship and festivity: truly a Good Night.

Music is an important part of Las Posadas processions on Noche Buena such as this one in Oaxaca, Mexico

Being held at night, nature can sometimes add to the mystery and wonder of Midnight Mass

Light in the Darkness

There is something special about going to church while all around the world sleeps: Midnight Mass is a unique experience

Written by Edoardo Albert

The great feast for the first Christians was Easter. However, within a few generations the number of festivals multiplied. By the early 200s, the Feast of Epiphany, which commemorates Jesus's baptism in the River Jordan, had been added to the liturgical calendar. Epiphany quickly became associated with the earlier visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus, as recounted in the Gospel of Matthew and by the early third century, Christians were dating Jesus's birth to 25 December.

The first evidence we have for Christians celebrating Midnight Mass comes from a remarkable document written in the early 380s. Egeria, a wealthy Christian woman, went on a long pilgrimage to the Holy Land and wrote of what she had seen and done there to her circle of friends upon her return. Included among her observations was the way that the Christians in Bethlehem held a service in Bethlehem at the location ascribed by tradition as Jesus's birthplace, followed by a candlelit procession through the night to Jerusalem.

By 440, the practice had spread at least to Rome for in that year Pope Sixtus III installed a manger in the chapel of the church of St Mary Major and celebrated mass at midnight. The belief that Jesus was born at midnight had become widespread by the 4th century with a hymn, *Quando noctis medium*, singing of his birth at that time. In the following centuries, it became the custom for the Pope to celebrate three masses for Christmas: at midnight, dawn and on Christmas morning. Dispensation was also given to other priests to say three masses on Christmas Day so long as each had different readings.

While the mass is traditionally known as Midnight Mass, it is not necessarily celebrated at the stroke of midnight. Its official liturgical name is the 'Mass During the Night' and today it can be celebrated on the evening of Christmas Eve - Pope Benedict celebrated 'Midnight Mass' at 10pm twice and Pope Francis celebrated it at 9.30pm in 2013 and at 7.30pm in 2020 and 2021 because of Covid curfews. In Latin America, Midnight Mass is known as la Misa del Gallo, or the Mass of the Rooster, and it was traditionally timed to begin when the cock crowed for the first time, usually somewhere around 3 or 4am.

At whatever time it is celebrated, Midnight Mass remains a celebration imbued with a special reverence: children woken from their beds, stumbling sleepy-eyed to church, the windows glowing with light while outside everything is dark, all in memory of a baby born to a poor couple in a stable, the sort of people whom history normally ignores.

The light shining out into the dark through the stained glass windows of a church makes for a memorable sight on Christmas Eve

Midnight Mass is celebrated throughout the world: here in Kolkata, India

Image source: Alamy

Songs of Christmas

The evolution of dancing songs into the Christmas carols of today

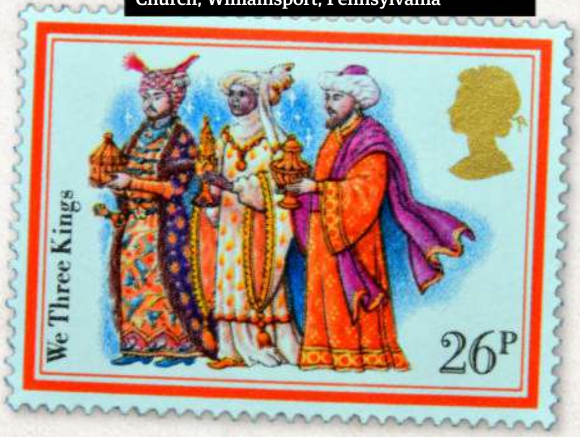
Written by Edoardo Albert

While Christmas music is as old as the festival itself, most Christmas carols are surprisingly recent. The word 'carol' itself derives from the French word carole, which was the name of a dance. In their earliest usage in the English language, carols were simply songs of celebration, songs that could be sung at any glad occasion. However, the 12-day feast of Christmas (which started at Christmas and finished at Epiphany) provided plenty of opportunity for singing and merrymaking. Indeed, the earliest recorded English carol (dating to 1200 and sung in Norman French) associated Christmas with drinking as firmly as it did with Jesus.

However, as the Christmas feast loomed larger in the calendar, carols became more and more associated with the festival. In 1521, Wynkyn de Worde published the first collection of 'Christmasse carolles' although not all the songs were religious. Carols themselves remained largely songs to be sung at home or outside of church: carol singers going house to house is an old tradition. This tradition was picked up enthusiastically by non-conformist congregations who specialised in writing and singing hymns: Charles Wesley wrote the original version of *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing* around 1739.

Indeed, Christmas carols were so popular that the Church of England decided it needed to get in on the act, with music publishers putting out collections of Christmas carols from 1822 onwards. William Sandys collection of *Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern* appeared in 1833, including the first publication of what have become classics such as *I Saw Three Ships*, *The First Noel*, *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen* and *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing*, stripped down and rewritten from Wesley's original eight-verse version. The popularity of these and similar collections lead to the writing of new Christmas carols, many by American songwriters, including *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, *Away in a Manger* and *We Three Kings of Orient Are*. *Jingle Bells* was written in 1857 by James Pierpoint.

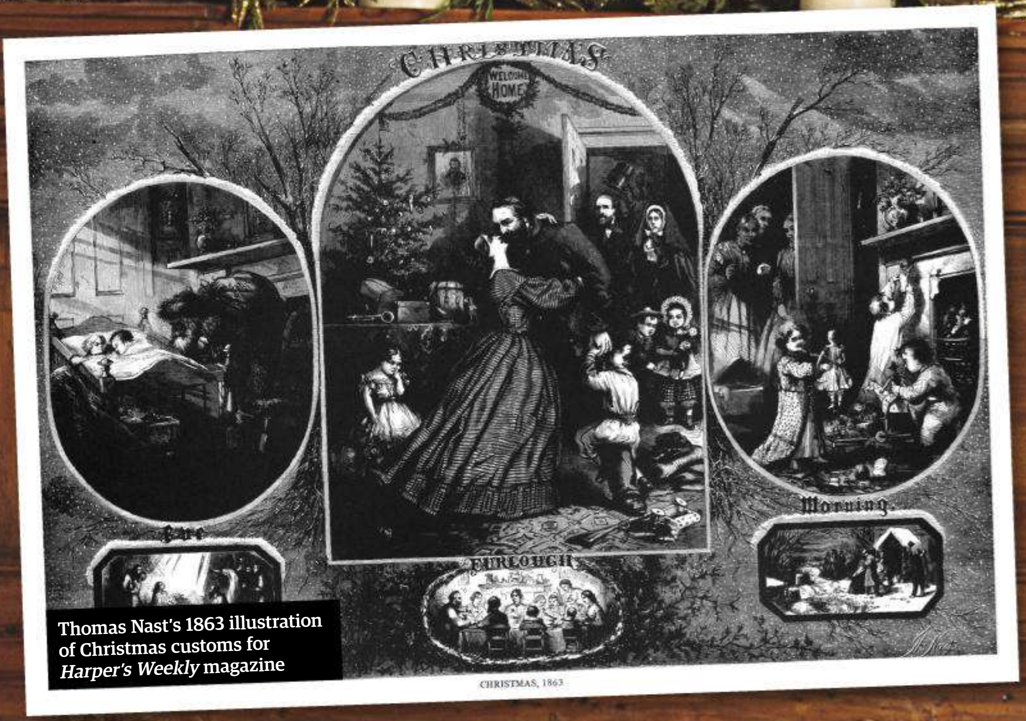
Faced with the popularity of Christmas carols, EW Benson, Bishop of Truro, created the service of Nine Lessons and Carols in 1880. The service was popular and spread quickly. The Chapel of King's College, Cambridge celebrated the service in 1918 and in 1928 the fledgling BBC broadcast the choir's singing of the service to the nation. It so perfectly fitted people's ideas of what should be sung and done at Christmas that Nine Lessons and Carols quickly came to be seen as a venerable tradition, even thought it is relatively recent. But then, words and music have always been fundamental to the celebration of Christmas, while the exact tunes and songs have changed through the centuries.



***We Three Kings...* was written in 1857 by John Henry Hopkins Jr, rector of Christ Episcopal Church, Williamsport, Pennsylvania**

Carolling started off as largely an outdoor activity, only later moving to the relative warmth inside churches

The Service of Nine Lessons and Carols from King's College, Cambridge is an example of how a practice that has only just past its centenary can seem much more venerable than it is


Christmas
Welcome Home
Eve
Furlough
Morning
CHRISTMAS, 1863

Thomas Nast's 1863 illustration of Christmas customs for *Harper's Weekly* magazine

Clement Clarke Moore's 1823 poem established much of the modern Christmas folklore although in his version, Santa Claus was a diminutive figure able to slide down chimneys without the need for any size-changing magic

Image source: Getty images / Alamy

From St Nicholas to the Mantelpiece

The origins of the Christmas stocking go back to the stories of St Nicholas but carry on into the present day

Written by Edoardo Albert

It's a bit odd, really. Hanging up stockings, whether it be by the fireplace, on a mantelpiece or at the bottom of the bed, for Father Christmas to fill with small toys, gifts, and, of course, satsumas. The search for the historical origin of the tradition disappears into the undocumented past but scholars usually link the custom to one of the stories that grew up around the figure of the 4th-century bishop of Myra, Nicholas.

According to the tale, Nicholas learned of an impoverished widower with three daughters. As the father did not have the money to provide dowries for the girls, they were likely to spiral further into destitution, with prostitution the likely end point of their descent. To save them from such a fate, and mindful of their dignity, Nicholas anonymously left gold coins (or in some versions gold balls, hence the satsumas) in the stockings that the girls had left hanging from a washing line to dry in the Sun.

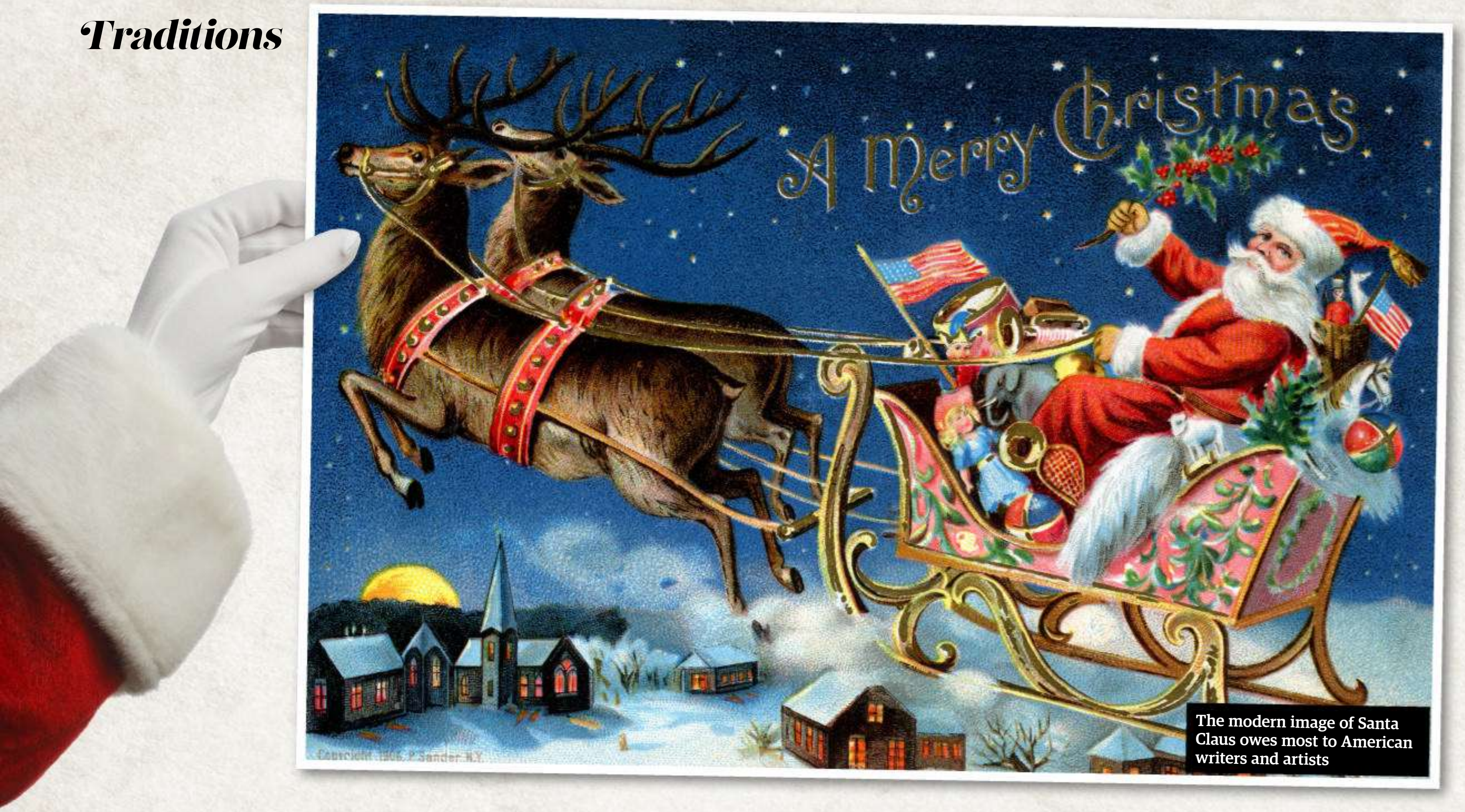
While the story itself is a later accretion to the legends surrounding Nicholas, it quickly became very popular and appears to have inspired the custom of leaving gifts for children in hung-up stockings. The custom was first attached to the feast of St Nicholas on 5 or 6 December, but by the start of the 19th century the tradition had started shifting to Christmas Eve.

Then, in 1823, one of the most influential poems ever written was published, anonymously at first. The third line of *The Night Before Christmas* runs 'The stockings were hung by the chimney with care' and, along with Santa Claus, named reindeer and entry via the fireplace, the modern folklore of Christmas was established. What had previously been the custom of European countries with a particular reverence for St Nicholas was transplanted across the Atlantic and then to the rest of the world.

By the mid-19th century, we have historical evidence for the spread of Christmas stockings. The cartoonist and illustrator, Thomas Nast, produced a triptych for the Christmas 1863 edition of *Harper's Weekly* showing contemporary Christmas customs: the right-hand illustration is of delighted children opening gifts and taking down their stockings from the fireplace.

George Webster's 1869 book, *Santa Claus and his Works* has many mentions of children hanging stockings and Santa filling them.

The idea that naughty children would find a lump of coal rather than gifts in their stocking was a later variation on the tale. Coal first appears in Christmas tales as a welcome gift to help warm poor family's homes. But by the early 20th century, moralistic writers of children's stories were beginning to establish a link between bad behaviour and lumps of coal and by the 1920s it had become a common trope. As coal has disappeared as a method of home heating, so it has disappeared from our ideas of Christmas, a real life demonstration of how this most flexible of festivals adapts itself to an ever-changing world.



The modern image of Santa Claus owes most to American writers and artists

From St Nicholas to Santa Claus

How an obscure bishop from Turkey became the personification of Christmas

Written by Edoardo Albert

Visitors to the small Turkish town of Demre, situated on the Teke peninsula jutting into the Mediterranean, might wonder at the surprising amount of Orthodox iconography in this Muslim settlement. But a visit to the church of St Nicholas will provide the first clue. This ancient basilica, dating from 520 CE, remained a place of worship until 1923 when the Greek residents of the town were forced to leave during the population exchange between Greece and Turkey that saw the Christian populations of Turkey and the Muslim populations of Greece forcibly removed from their ancestral homes.

The church of St Nicholas was built above the tomb of the 4th century bishop of Myra, then a major city of the ancient world. St Nicholas was first venerated for dying as a martyr, most probably as a result of the Diocletian Persecution of the first decade of the 4th century. As a martyr, Nicholas's remains, his relics, were treasured and kept at his church. However, when Anatolia was conquered by the Seljuk Turks in 1071 some enterprising Italian sailors from Bari decided to liberate the relics of holy St Nicholas from the heathen Turks. The Orthodox monks guarding Nicholas's relics put up a robust defence but the Italians fought their way through and returned home with most of the bishop's bones, enshrining them in the Basilica di San Nicola in Bari.

Scientific tests and measurements that were done on these remains, and some others that managed to make their way to America, have allowed us to say something more about Nicholas, Bishop of Myra. Radio-carbon dating confirmed that the relics came from a man who died in the early 4th century – right at the time of the Diocletian Persecution. Skeletal examination revealed that Nicholas had been of average height and that he had chronic arthritis in his spine and pelvis. Finally, facial reconstruction showed that, when he died, Nicholas had a badly broken nose – most probably as the result of the beatings he endured during his martyrdom.

It's all a long way from kindly Santa Claus, dealing out presents to children from the back of his sledge. Given the climate in southern Turkey, it's safe to say that the original Santa Claus would never have seen a sledge, let alone reindeer. So how did St Nicholas become Santa Claus?

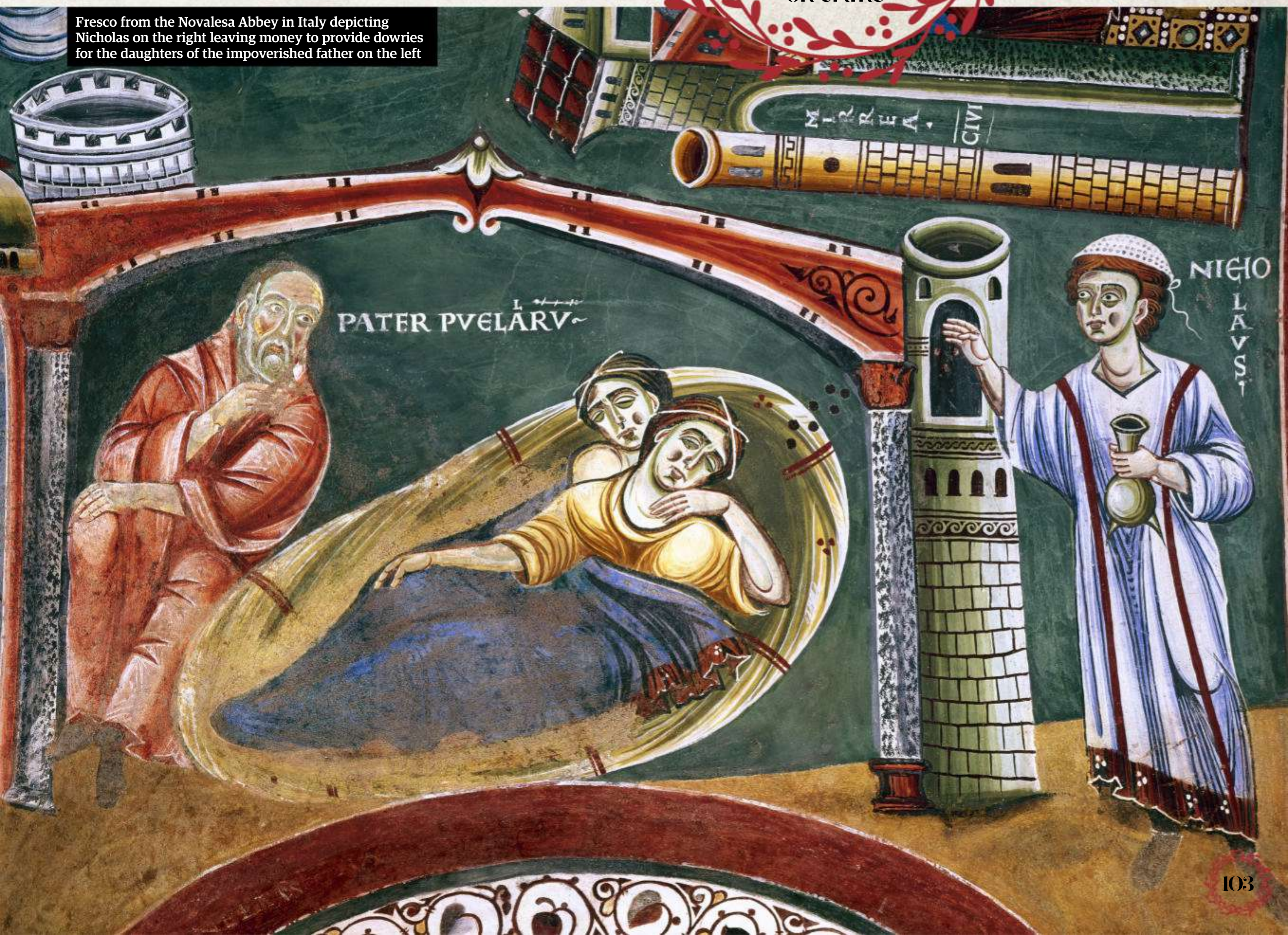
The wonder worker of Myra

That Nicholas was remembered and revered in his diocese is clear from the care paid to house and commemorate his relics for several centuries. But in terms of actual historical knowledge of what he did, we have very little. If he did die in the Diocletian Persecution, then he would not have been able to attend the great Church council of 325 in nearby Nicaea. But Nicholas was one of those figures of the early church who attracted stories and legends. With the lack of hard information about him, storytellers and hagiographers had free rein to fill in the blanks. They did so with gusto.

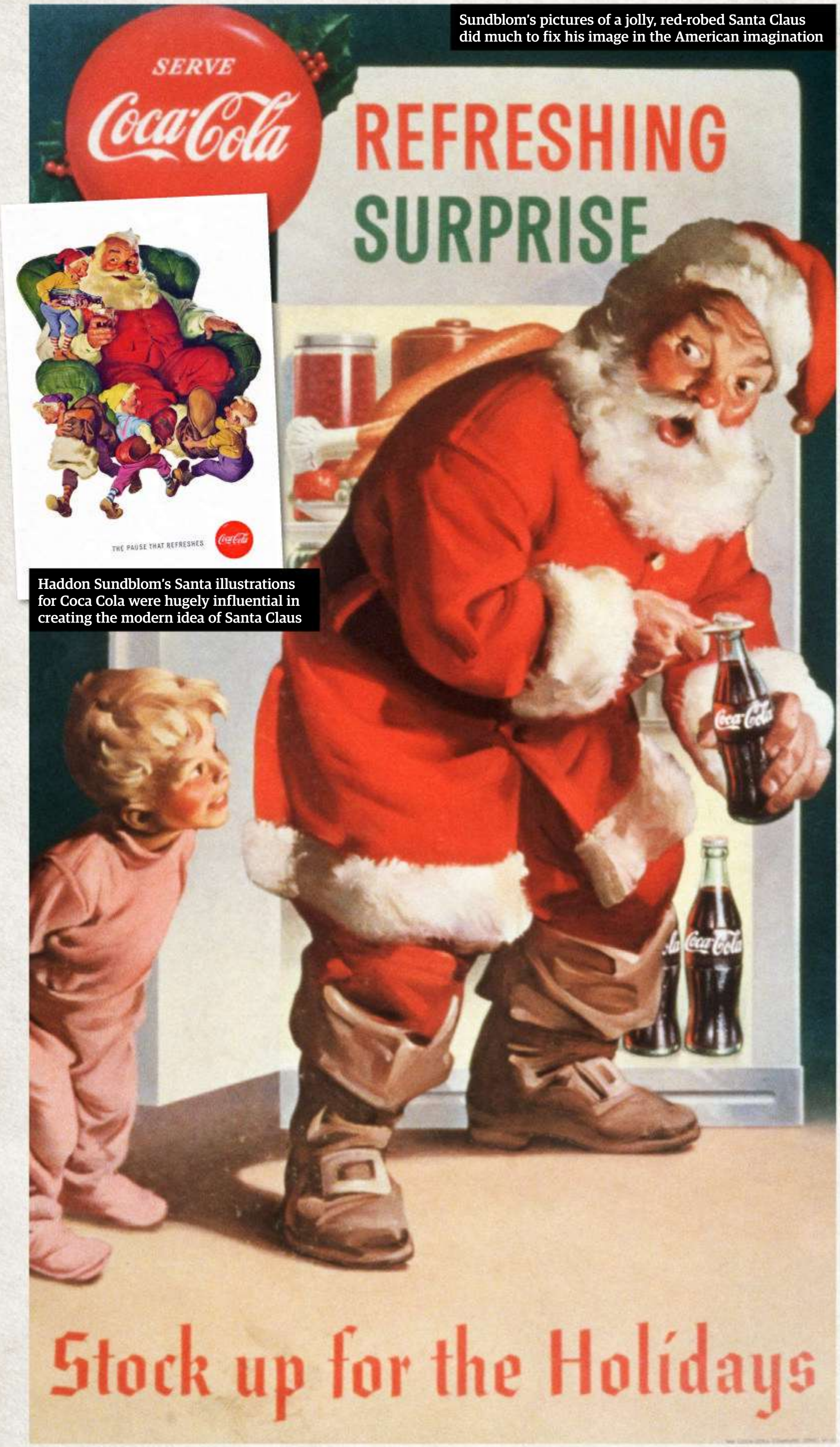
> St Nicholas is the patron saint of children, as well as brewers, sailors, and thieves who've turned their back on crime

In *The Life of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker*, written by Michael the Archimandrite in the first half of the 9th century, we find the first paper evidence for the legend that would provide the seed for Santa Claus. According to Michael, who may have been retelling an earlier story, a local widower who had three daughters had fallen into penury. With no money to provide dowries for his daughters, the prospect was that they would descend into prostitution. When Nicholas heard of the girls' plight, he secretly visited their house on three successive nights, throwing a purse with gold through the window on each visit. On the third night, the girls' father chased after their mysterious benefactor and discovered that it was Nicholas.

The story became extremely popular, being retold often, and it featured in many works of art, starting with an



Fresco from the Novalesa Abbey in Italy depicting Nicholas on the right leaving money to provide dowries for the daughters of the impoverished father on the left



Sundblom's pictures of a jolly, red-robed Santa Claus did much to fix his image in the American imagination

Haddon Sundblom's Santa illustrations for Coca Cola were hugely influential in creating the modern idea of Santa Claus

Coca-Cola didn't dress Santa in red

In 1931, Haddon Sundblom (1899-1976) began working for the Coca-Cola company as an artist. Drawing on Clement Clarke Moore's poem, *The Night Before Christmas*, Sundblom drew a Santa who was plump, jolly, bearded and dressed in red with white fur trimming. So popular did Sundblom's advertising pictures of Santa Claus become that he continued painting them for Coca-Cola for the next 33 years. The image of the red-suited Santa Claus knocking back a bottle of Coke in between delivering presents to the nation's children became a staple of the American imagination, so much so that an urban myth grew up that it was the Coca-Cola advertising that first dressed Santa Claus in red. In fact, the man responsible was Thomas Nast (1840-1902). Nast was primarily a political cartoonist but in his illustration for *Harper's Magazine* for Christmas, 1863, during the American Civil War, he depicted 'Santa Claus in Camp' giving gifts to soldiers separated from their families at Christmas. Nast continued to draw Santa Claus and, in 1869, *Harper's Magazine* went colour. Nast therefore had to decide what colour Santa's clothes should be. Ideally, a colour that would stand out on the page. Red. Red with an edging of white fur. So it was Nast who dressed Santa in red, although Sundblom's hugely popular drawings popularised Santa's fashion choice.

8th century fresco in Rome. Fra Angelico (1395-1455) painted St Nicholas wearing a red cape.A key element of the story appears for the first time in a fresco in the church of Saints Constantine and Helena in Ramaca, Serbia: Nicholas is on the roof dropping money down the chimney.

Other tales of Nicholas's wonder-working told of his special regard for children. One story tells of his reviving three boys who had been cut up and put into a barrel: the story started off with the boys being young men but, in retelling, the young men gradually became younger. As well as children, Nicholas had also become associated with sailors and they were the people who took him out into the wider world.

St ‘Nicholas, the patron of sailors

By the time the Italians from Bari stole his relics from Myra, St Nicholas had become known as a particular patron of sailors. In part, this appears to be the conflation of two different Saints Nicholas: Nicholas of Myra and Nicholas of Sion, to whom

The Oude Kerk in Amsterdam, the oldest building in the city, was originally dedicated to St Nicholas although its link to the saint was largely lost following the Reformation

sailors prayed to change the wind. As such, churches dedicated to St Nicholas appeared in ports throughout the Mediterranean and onto the Atlantic coast.

The saint's feast day was 6 December and by the 12th century it had become an occasion for processions and celebrations in northern Europe as well. Nicholas's popularity with sailors led him to having the first church in a new trading city dedicated to him: the Oude Kerk of Amsterdam was consecrated to St Nicholas in 1306.

In Amsterdam, Saint Nikolaos became Santa Klaas and then Sinterklaas. As Sinterklaas, Nicholas was transformed from being the patron of sailors to the giver of gifts - although these were edible gifts, such as nuts and dried fruit, given to children on his feast day. The custom spread steadily throughout northern Europe and by the 16th century a Swiss theologian, Rudolf Hospinian, wrote of parents secretly leaving little gifts to their children on the feast of St Nicholas and telling the children the gifts came from the saint. The elements of the modern Santa Claus were slowly falling into place.

Santa Claus crosses the ocean

In 1624, the Dutch West India Company founded a colony in America and named its capital, built on Manhattan Island, New Amsterdam. In 1664, New Amsterdam became New York when the British took control of the island and its surrounding area. The Dutch colonists who had founded New Amsterdam remained, however, and they presumably continued to celebrate Sinterklaas by giving gifts. While little trace of this found its way into the historical record, the lore of this gift giving wonder-worker percolated out into wider American society until, in 1809, it was published in *A History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*. The author was ostensibly one Dietrich Knickerbocker but this was a pseudonym of the American writer, Washington Irving. ('Knickerbocker' was the name of the knee-high trousers favoured by the Dutch settlers which became so synonymous with New Yorkers that the city's basketball team is called the New York Knicks.)

In Irving's fantastical history, St Nicholas could fly, driving his wagon and horses up into the sky so that he could drop children's gifts down the chimneys of their parents' houses. Not one to let historical fact get in the way of a good tale, Irving claimed that the first church in New York was dedicated to St Nicholas (in fact, New York's first settlers were devout Protestants who had forsworn the papistical veneration of saints). But while Washington Irving may have established the idea of Santa Claus using a flying vehicle to deliver presents, it was another American who filled in most of the details of the modern Santa Claus.

Clement Clarke Moore (1779-1863) was a professor at the General Theological Seminary of the Protestant Episcopal Church in New York. In the early 1820s he wrote a poem for his children. The poem was copied and circulated among his friends and in 1823 one of those friends sent the poem to the Sentinel newspaper, which published it on 23 December 1823. The poem was called *A Visit from St Nicholas* but it has almost universally come to be named for its first line: 'Twas the night before Christmas' (or sometimes 'The night before Christmas').

> 'Much of the modern imagery of Santa Claus comes from 19th and 20th century America'

The most influential poem in history

In one poem, Moore synthesised the pre-existing elements of the lore of Santa Claus while adding some key new ingredients of his own. The poem was a huge success and reprinted often in the next decade, its author remaining anonymous until 1837, when Moore claimed authorship.

Moore had stayed silent for so long because he feared it would reflect ill on his august position as a professor of theology.

The Night Before Christmas is almost certainly the most influential lyric poem in history. It has stockings hanging from the mantelpiece. Snow covering the ground. St Nicholas driving a flying sledge pulled by eight reindeer. The delivery of presents and St Nicholas arriving down the chimney with a sack of toys on his back. A white beard and a twinkling smile.

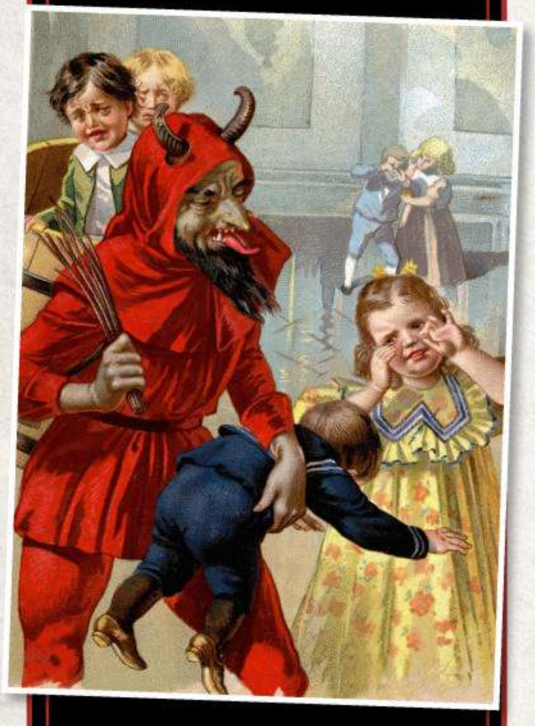
In one poem, Moore put together almost all the modern folklore of Santa Claus. But there were still two elements missing. There's no mention of what colour his clothes are and, strikingly, in Moore's version Santa Claus is small, 'a right jolly old elf', tiny enough to come down the chimney without getting stuck on the way, and his reindeer are as small as he is.

The reindeer were not original to Moore. An 1821 picture in *The Children's Friend* magazine shows a little Santa Claus driving his reindeer-pulled sleigh between chimneys. The idea of Santa Claus and reindeer was in the general storytelling air. But

Santa's helpers

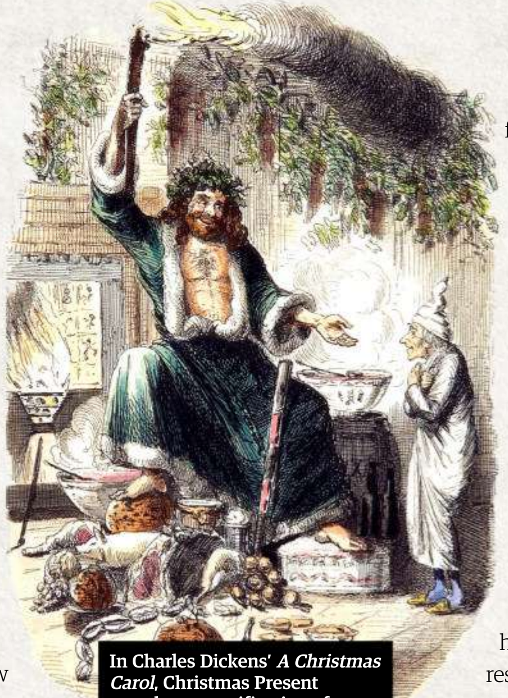
It was the writer Louisa M Alcott (*Little Women*) who first gave Santa elfin helpers in a short story she wrote in 1855. Before then, during his long journey to America, Santa had picked up many other strange associates. The Netherlands was the key stop in St Nicholas's journey to becoming Santa Claus and there he acquired as his helper Zwarte Piet, Black Pete. St Nicholas' Day processions in the Netherlands usually featured Zwarte Piet in the guise of somebody in blackface makeup and with a wig. Germany produced a whole range of assistants for St Nicholas, including Knecht Ruprecht, Hans Muff, Hans Trapp, Rumpanz and Pelzmärte, as well as hobby-horses and creatures that were half man and half goat.

The strangest of all these helpers is undoubtedly Krampus, a fearsome folkloric creature who figures in the Christmas tales of central and eastern Europe. Krampus is a half-goat, half-demon monster, with horns, who functions as St Nicholas' dark half. On 6 December, St Nicholas' Day, when St Nicholas visits families, those children who have been good receive small presents from the saint. But if the child has been bad during the year, then Krampus will beat him or her with birch sticks. It's enough to give a child nightmares.



Some stories said that in the case of the very worst children the Krampus might steal them away and eat them

It was Moore who gave names to the reindeer: Dasher, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Dunder and Blixen. Dunder and Blixen have gradually become Donner and Blitzen and the popularity of Robert L May's 1939 story, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, and the 1949 song, of the same name, have led to the lead reindeer Rudolph joining Santa's team. But the rest of the reindeers' names still follow Moore's original scheme.



In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Christmas Present was the personification of Christmas, but with a distinctly bacchanalian flavour

Christmas Eve

Perhaps the most influential line of Moore's poem is its first: 'Twas the night before Christmas'. The Dutch gave presents on the feast of St Nicholas: 6 December. Other countries gave presents on different days. The British favoured New Year's Day. Italians, both in Italy and the emigrants in America, gave presents on Epiphany, the present giver being Befana, an old woman with a broomstick and a big nose. It was the Germans who favoured Christmas Day for giving gifts, although in their case the present giver was the infant Jesus.

But *The Night Before Christmas* moved Santa's present spree to Christmas and while there was some resistance to this shift – some reprints of Moore's poem began with the line 'Twas the night before New Year' – it was too late: commercial and social forces were all pulling in the same direction. Christmas, in its modern form, was almost complete.

Father Christmas and Santa Claus

Although these two names are synonymous today, they once represented two distinct characters. In Germany, although children were given presents at Christmas, the present giver was the Christkind – the Christ child.

Meanwhile, in Britain, the Reformation had broken links between saints' days and the calendar. However, the British had developed a personification of the feast itself: Father Christmas. Father Christmas followed Nowell and he first appears in a carol from the early 15th century as Sir Christmas. Other songs and tales call him Captain Christmas, Old Christmas and Mr Christmas. Whatever his name, he is usually described as an old, thin man. As such, he remains a marginal figure, disappearing into the twilight of the wandering mummers' plays. His first documented appearance is in a play from the 1780s: "Here comes I, old Father Christmas, welcome or welcome not, I hope old Father Christmas will never be forgot."

As the 18th century turned into the 19th and Victoria assumed the throne, Father Christmas had become a figure resembling a midwinter Bacchus: a reveller in green. It was this figure that Charles Dickens turned to in his 1843 story, *A Christmas Carol*. While Clement Clarke Moore's poem developed the trappings of the modern Christmas, it was Dicken's great story that created its mythology.

A Christmas Carol has three personifications of Christmas: Past, Present and Yet to Come. The miser, Scrooge, encounters each of these personifications of Christmas and, at the story's end, he has been transformed from a flint-hearted man dead to all sympathy to someone who might plausibly pass as a human being.

Dickens wrote the book in a fever of creativity: he had the idea in October 1843 and it was in bookshops by 19 December. According to his account, Dickens wrote it in his head while walking for miles through the black streets of London while people were asleep. Christmas Present, a green-clad giant, is an iteration of the English idea of Bacchus as Christmas.

The book was a huge success. And it was a success not just commercially but spiritually: it changed people. And it ensured that turkey supplanted goose as the traditional fowl served at Christmas. Clement Clarke Moore may have developed the trappings of Christmas but it was Charles Dickens who defined its spirit.

Under the influence of Dickens and with the Royal Family putting out portraits of themselves sitting around a decorated Christmas tree, the festival vaulted into first place in popularity in the Victorian era. With that popularity came an intermingling of the American idea of Santa Claus with the British notion of Father Christmas. So from about 1850 onwards there was a slow transformation in the way that artists depicted Father Christmas. Previously, Father Christmas had often been depicted with a goat as his companion and wearing Greek robes - a true holdover from the figure of Bacchus. But the robes go, to be replaced by a fur coat with a hood. The Christmas tree starts to appear.

Under the weight of imported American culture, by the first decades of the 20th century the transformation was all but complete. Father Christmas now wore red robes. He had reindeer rather than a goat. His beard had grown and become pure white. But the old Father Christmas, the personification of Nowell, still broke through in the long echoing laugh, the "Ho, ho, ho," that trailed behind him as he moved through the long dark of Christmas night.

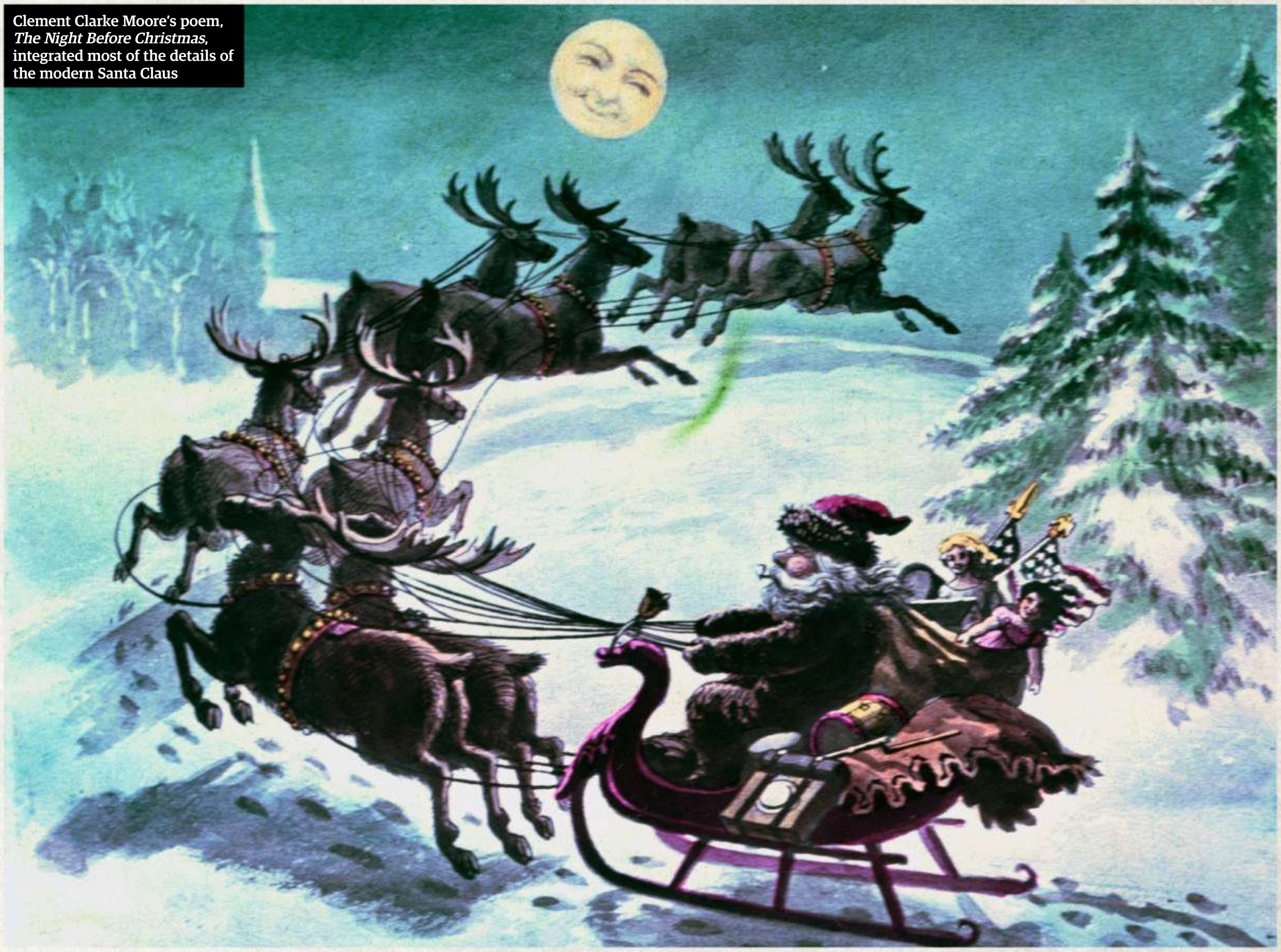
A home in the north

The man who was most responsible for fixing the modern idea of what Santa Claus looks like was the American cartoonist and illustrator Thomas Nast (1840-1902). As Nast developed his visual ideas about Santa Claus, the question arose: where did Santa live for the other 364 days of the year? In 1866, Nast answered that question. In a drawing published in *Harper's Magazine*, Nast gave Santa's address: Santaclaussville, N.P. (that is, the North Pole). Coupled with reindeer and sleighs, the answer made sense and soon other writers and illustrators started depicting Santa Claus in the frozen north.

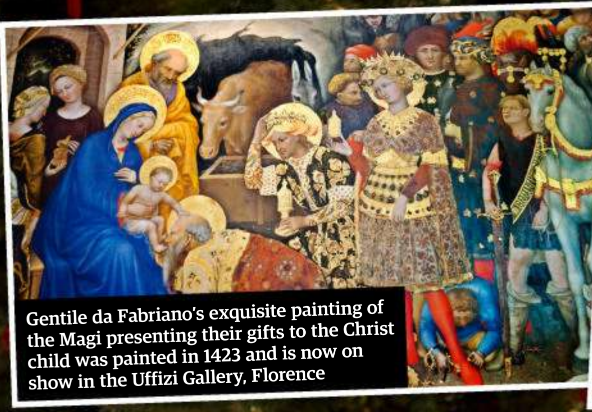
But where in the north? It was only in 1909 that the first expedition, led by Robert Peary and Matthew Henson, claimed to have reached the North Pole (although there is now some dispute as to whether they truly reached the Pole). But exploration had revealed that the North Pole was actually in the middle of a sea: not the ideal place for Santa's home, while polar bears would have quickly finished off his reindeer.

So in 1927, the Finns claimed that Lapland was Santa's real home. After all, Lapland had snow, reindeer, and people that actually lived there: the Sami. Santa's address in Lapland entered general knowledge, bizarrely, as a result of the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1939. As part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Nazi Germany, the two countries had divided eastern Europe up between them and when Germany invaded Poland, the Soviet Union attacked the Baltic States and Finland. While the Germans made short work of Poland, the Soviet invasion of Finland was met with stern resistance by the hugely outnumbered Finns. When American journalists started reporting on the invasion, to situate the countries for their home audience they invariably mentioned that Finland was Santa's home. So not only were the Soviets the unprovoked aggressors, but on top of that they were attacking Santa Claus!

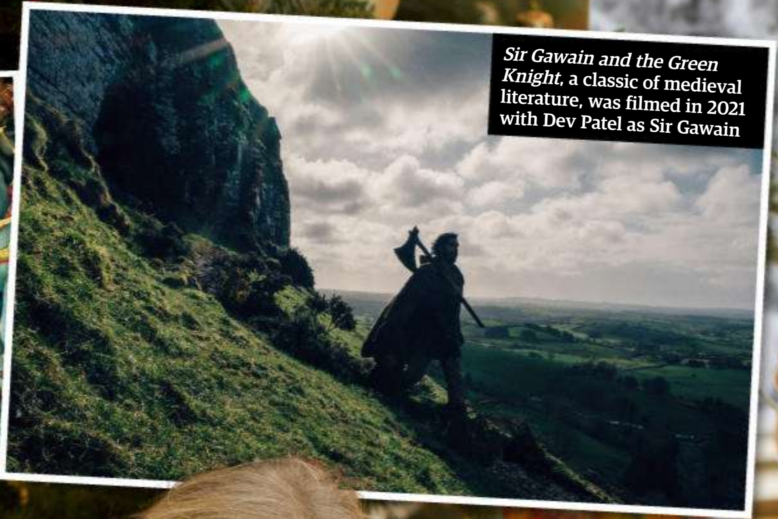
Ever since, Santa's normal residence has been firmly fixed in Lapland, so much so that he now figures largely in the region's tourist literature and itineraries. It has been a long, long journey for the man who began as an obscure 4th-century bishop on the warm shores of the Mediterranean.



Clement Clarke Moore's poem, *The Night Before Christmas*, integrated most of the details of the modern Santa Claus



Gentile da Fabriano's exquisite painting of the Magi presenting their gifts to the Christ child was painted in 1423 and is now on show in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence



Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, a classic of medieval literature, was filmed in 2021 with Dev Patel as Sir Gawain

Children, and their parents, were not always buried under the weight of Christmas presents

What I Want for Christmas

How Christmas became a time to give – and receive! – lots of presents

Written by Edoardo Albert

"What's the true meaning of Christmas?" asked the priest.

"Presents," chorused the children.

Not perhaps the answer the priest was hoping for but the one that probably looms largest in the minds of the young and, indeed, their parents. But for most of its history, Christmas was not associated with giving gifts: that was done at other times of the year. It varied by country but one of the earliest recorded gifting traditions, first attested in the 4th century, was the Roman custom of giving presents at New Year.

New Year presents were given in medieval Britain too, although they were generally gifts given by those lower in the social hierarchy to those who were their superiors. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a 14th-century poem, Arthur's knights presented him with presents at New Year. As the mercantile class grew, little gifts came to be exchanged between merchants, customers and suppliers: it all served to ensure good relationships. It's not entirely clear why this form of present giving shifted to Christmas but by the 1700s it had become common. In fact, it became so ubiquitous that merchants were forced into placing adverts announcing that they would not be giving Christmas boxes to customers' servants and nor were their own staff to ask for presents from customers.

By the middle of the 1800s, Christmas presents had become expected in Britain. This was facilitated by Christmas becoming a family occasion as well as a church feast. Britain was also becoming a commercial nation: people were making and importing items that could be given as presents.

Elsewhere in Europe, present giving had become associated with the feast of Epiphany on 6 January. Originally instituted to mark the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan and the start of his public ministry, Epiphany quickly synonymous with the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus. Since the Magi came bearing gifts for the Messiah, the feast became an occasion to give gifts, particularly to the young.

However, the publication in 1823 of the poem, *The Night Before Christmas*, changed everything. There's more about the extraordinary effect of this poem in the feature on Santa Claus but its effect was to pull everything towards Christmas. In Britain, and throughout the English-speaking world, present giving shifted from other dates to Christmas. Indeed, by the time Louisa May Alcott's novel, *Little Women*, was published in 1868, it could begin with the line, "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," and all the readers understood why. Our modern Christmas, loaded down with presents, was pushing its way on to the world's stage.

The Burning Log Festival

What appears to be one of the hoariest of Christmas traditions is not so ancient after all

Written by Edoardo Albert

The charred remnants of the Yule log were stored during the following year as protection against ills and then used to start the fire on the following Christmas

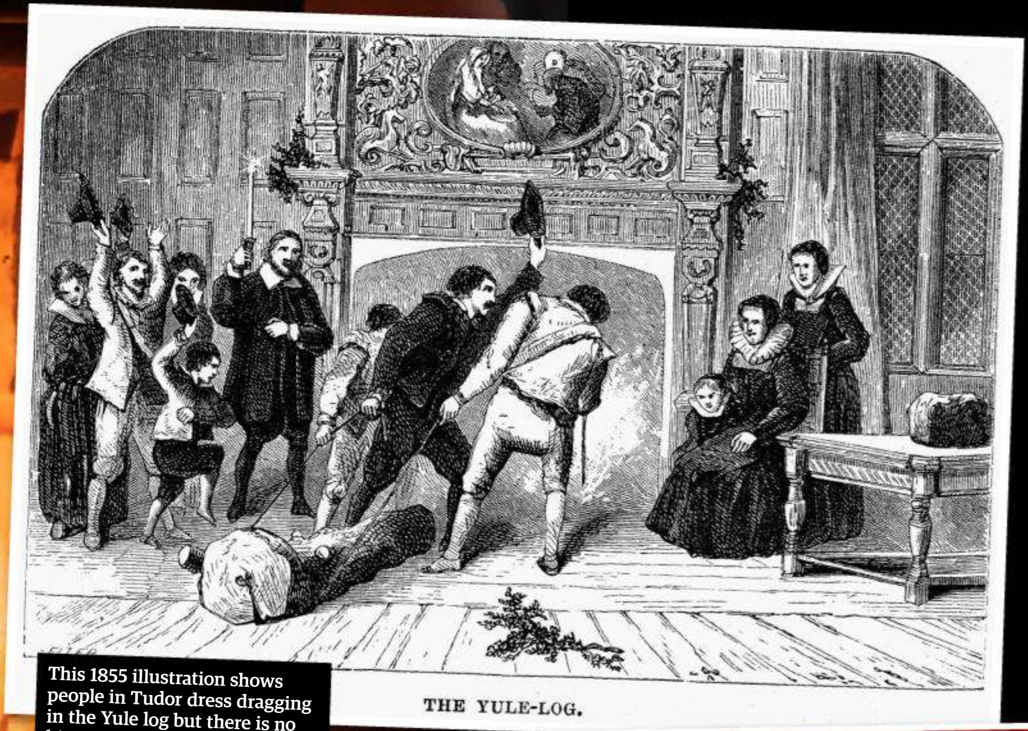
In our centrally heated world the custom of the Yule log has fallen somewhat out of favour. But when people relied on wood for heating, they would bring the Yule log into the family home on Christmas Eve and light it to mark the start of Christmas. Some versions insist that the Yule log should be kept burning throughout the 12 days of Christmas – although for that you would need a very large log indeed. Whatever remained of the log after Epiphany was carefully laid aside since it was believed to provide protection against lightning, evil spirits, housefires and ill luck before being used to help light next year's Yule log.

Since very few people nowadays have a fireplace, let alone one that could accommodate a log big enough to burn for 12 days, this has all the appearances of a thoroughly venerable tradition. Indeed, in many places on the internet you will see it said that the Yule log is a tradition going back to pagan antiquity.

It isn't. Of course, it's likely that pagan midwinter traditions included burning logs in order to keep warm, but there is no record in any of our sources for this being an integral part of pagan celebrations. In fact, the earliest records we can find of Yule logs date from the 17th century. However, the custom then became widespread in Britain and Europe, with many records of its practice in northern and western England, France, Germany and Scandinavia (not surprisingly, it is a custom associated more with countries that experience cold winters). Each country burned timber from a traditional tree for their Yule log: oak for England, cherry in France, and ash in the West Country of England.

However, as coal supplanted wood as the main winter fuel, and as people moved to the cities where it was much harder to find, let alone burn, logs at Christmas, the tradition of the Yule log changed from something flammable to something edible: the Bûche de Noël. This chocolate log is made from a rolled layer of sponge cake that is then covered and frosted so that it looks as if it is made from wood. As the name suggests, it was first baked in France.

In New York in 1966 the burning Yule log made a television comeback when Fred Thrower, general manager of WPIX, had the idea of broadcasting a video loop of logs burning in a fireplace on Christmas Eve accompanied by Christmas music. The idea proved so popular that many other TV stations adopted it and now, in the 21st century, you can find high definition versions of log fires at any time of the year as a calming aid – another example of how Christmas traditions adapt to our changing world.


THE YULE-LOG.

This 1855 illustration shows people in Tudor dress dragging in the Yule log but there is no historical record of this being a custom before the 17th century

The modern, edible version of the Yule log

Around the World in Christmas Dinners

From roast turkey and fruitcake to fish platters and panettone, Christmas dinner looks different depending where you are in the world

Written by Poppy-Jay St. Palmer

No matter where you're from, a destination Christmas will always look different to the one you left behind. Centuries of weird and wonderful traditions have led to each country or region developing different ways of celebrating. But wherever you go, one thing almost always remains the same: eating to excess, as contrasting cultures create their own festive food and beverage traditions.

Starting in Europe on Christmas Day, Britons enjoy an extremely heartily meal featuring a roast meat like turkey, ham or goose, mounds of potatoes, roasted vegetables, pigs in blankets (sausages wrapped in bacon), stuffing, yorkshire puddings and the ever-polarising brussel sprouts, served with cranberry sauce and generous lashings of gravy. Dessert is just as filling, with sweet mince pies and Christmas pudding (traditionally set alight while diners sing *We Wish You a Merry Christmas* as the flames disappear) served with brandy sauce being longtime crowd pleasers.

Not all countries eat their main Christmas meal on 25 December. In France, for example, the main feast is enjoyed on Christmas Eve. The meal usually consists of a long list of decadent dishes, including oysters, foie gras, a variety of cheeses and a chestnut-stuffed turkey. The savoury course is followed by bûche de Noël, or Yule log, the cakey Christmas dessert that has slowly become popular in neighbouring countries like Belgium and Switzerland, as well as several former French colonies like Canada, Vietnam and Lebanon. If a French Christmas dinner sounds like a belly buster, the people of Provence like to go one further and traditionally eat 13 desserts to represent Jesus Christ and the 12 apostles (although some of those 'desserts' are nuts, dried fruits and candied citrus peels).

Over the border, Germans keep things simple on Christmas Eve before going all out on Christmas Day, with a hearty plate of goose, rabbit, duck and Krustenbraten, or pork roast with a crispy rind. Things are made even more stodgy with sides of potato dumplings, red cabbage, and apple and sausage stuffing, and traditional decorated Christmas cookies called Weihnachtsplätzchen for dessert. One festive German food that has become popular in other parts of the world is, of course, Stollen, the deliciously moist, spirit-soaked, marzipan-filled fruitcake. As well as being a regular Christmas fixture, Stollen is also typically served at German weddings too.

Fish is a popular Christmas dish in many places as the fish was an early secret symbol of Christianity

In Hungary, traditions vary from province to province, but the most common Christmas meal is something a little different. Hungarians join the French in eating their main meal on Christmas Eve, although some even wait until after Midnight Mass to chow down. Fried fish and fish soup are some of the most popular festive dishes in the country, with fish being viewed as a symbol

Christmas dinner traditions look different around the world, from turkey and mince pies in the UK to sweet spaghetti in the Philippines

Many countries like to finish Christmas dinner with a slice of Yule log. The festive cake was made popular by France, where it's known as bûche de Noël

of Christianity. The Czech Republic honours a similar tradition, with fish soup or mushroom kuba (a risotto-like dish made using barley) being consumed, followed by a main course of fried carp. In Hungary, the fish dish is accompanied by a variety of meat, stuffed cabbage, kocsonya, or meat jelly, and beigli, a traditional Hungarian pastry dessert rolled with a bittersweet poppy seed filling. Desserts also hang on the Christmas trees in the form of szaloncukor, made from fondant covered in chocolate and wrapped in bright wrappers that double as tree decorations. Szaloncukor is also popular in Romanian and Slovakian households.

While some European countries have long-standing traditions, Christmas dinner in Iceland has changed with the centuries. In times gone by, many Icelandic people cooked slaughtered lamb

From offal to turkey

For many households across Britain, roast turkey with all the trimmings is a must-have each Christmas, but that hasn't always been the case. Before seasonal turkey became popular, medieval monks splashed out once a year on rare and expensive spices to season otherwise bland pies, fish and offal. Boar also became a popular main course with the general public, and you could often find a stuffed boar's head proudly displayed as the centrepiece of many a festive dining table. For the Georgian era, most moved on to elaborate roast goose dinners with an assortment of vegetables.

Turkeys aren't native to the UK, but documentation shows they started being imported in the early 16th century. British merchants bought the birds from Spanish conquistadors, who in turn brought them back from Mexico, where indigenous Mexican people had domesticated them. Henry VIII became the first monarch to eat turkey with his Christmas dinner, but the huge cost of the poultry meant that it would be a few hundred years before the notion of eating it for Christmas reached peak popularity. As more and more turkey farms popped up across the UK, it finally became a staple Christmas dish in the 19th century.

Although most British households enjoy roast turkey at Christmastime, the poultry only became popular for the festive period in the 16th century

Households in Japan enjoy takeaway from KFC on Christmas Day, following the fast food chain's 'Kentucky Fried Christmas' advertising campaign from 1974.

in a special meat broth called kjötsúpa, while ptarmigan (a game bird from the grouse family) was eaten by poorer families. Over time, ptarmigan has become more popular than kjötsúpa and is often eaten alongside ham and smoked lamb. The meats are served with sides like potatoes, beans, peas and lashings of gravy.

The dinner situation in Denmark is similar: traditionally, the Danes used to eat slow-cooked roast pork, known as Flæskesteg in Danish, on Christmas Eve. Nowadays, however, you'd be more likely to find them enjoying roast duck or goose with their main meal. As far as Danish side dishes go, rodkal or red cabbage is a popular one, traditionally made with elderberry or currant juice, salt, sugar and vinegar. The main course is often followed by ris à l'amande or risengrød – cold rice pudding and hot rice pudding respectively, each decadently served with whipped cream, vanilla, almonds and hot cherry sauce. To add a little fun to the meal, a peeled almond is hidden in the serving bowl of each pudding, and whoever finds it wins an extra present.

Where much of Europe tends to serve heavy, nap-inducing meals, Finland's Christmas offering is almost light in comparison. Eaten on 24 December, Finns usually serve up plates of traditional Finnish staples, including juicy oven-baked ham with sides of root vegetable – or rutabaga – casserole, mixed beetroot salad and sweet pea sauce. The collection of dishes together make what is widely known as the Joulupöytä, which appropriately translates to 'Yule table'.

If red meat isn't quite to your tastes, many European countries remove meat from the Christmas menu and replace it with fish dishes. In southern Italy, the yuletide traditional meal is known as La Vigilia, which sees Southern Italians spending Christmas Eve gathered with family around a spectacular multi-course dinner while waiting to mark the birth of Jesus at Midnight Mass. The likes of octopus, salt cod, clams and anchovies feature heavily throughout the meal. Italy is also the home of Panettone, a sweet and fluffy bread flavoured with raisins and candied orange, citron and lemon zest. The cake originally came from Milan, but has since found its way onto tables all over Europe, South America, Australia, Canada and the United States, and is enjoyed from Christmas all the way through to the New Year.

Over to the west, the Portuguese follow the Catholic tradition of fasting on 24 December and end the fast with a meal called Consoada, containing bacalhau (salt cod) or polvo (octopus),

Germany's traditional Christmas fruitcake, Stollen, has steadily become popular in other parts of the world, and is made using nuts, spices, candied fruit, spirits and often marzipan

served with a mixture of boiled eggs, cabbage and potato. In Poland, Christmas is celebrated with a huge, entirely meatless 12-dish meal known as the Wigilia Feast, featuring staples like red borscht, carp, herring and pierogi.

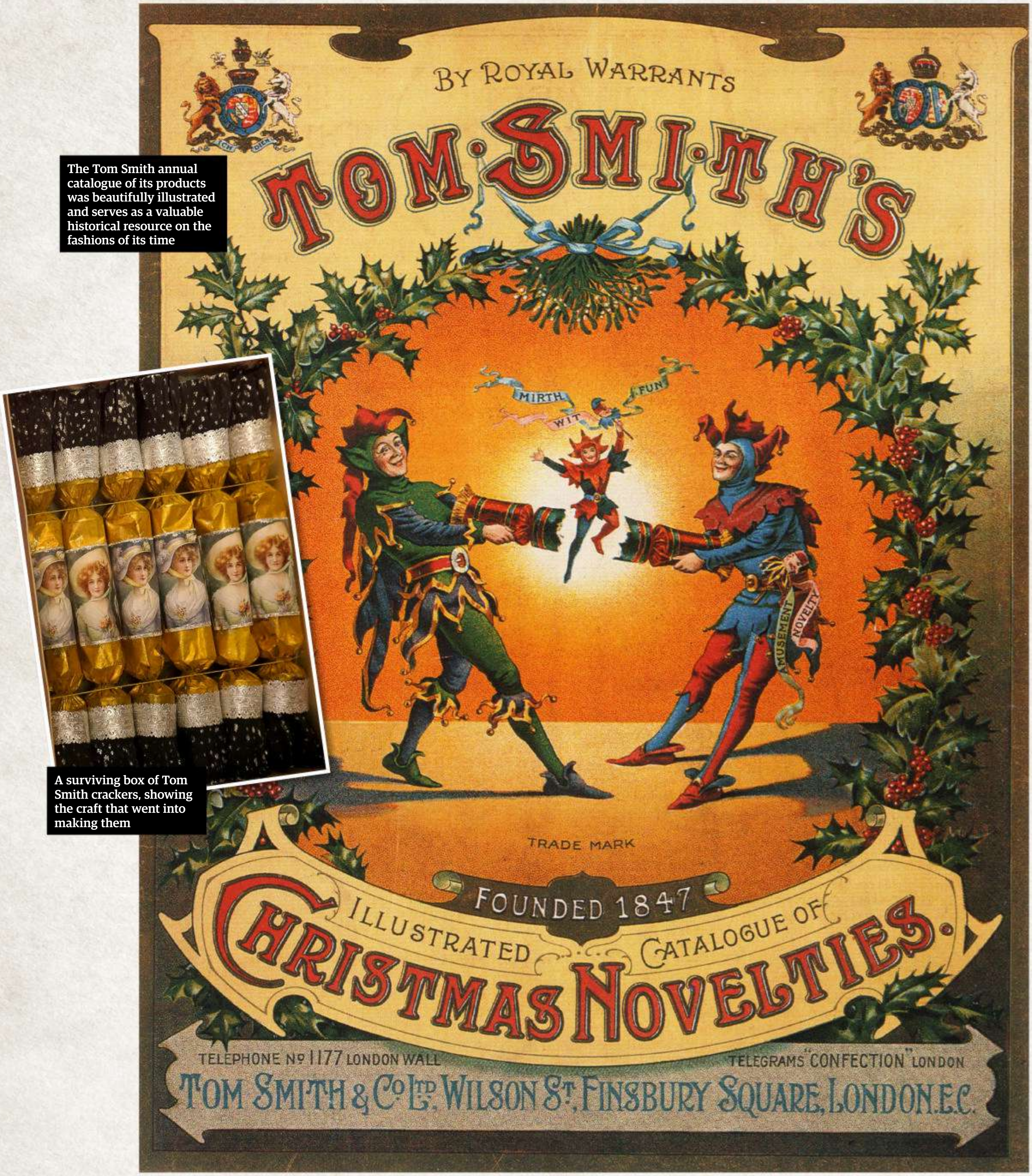
It's not just Europe that goes big on food during the holiday period. Catholic and other Christian communities in India mark the occasion with traditional festive sweets known as kuswar, which include cookies, fruitcakes, cardamom and cashew macaroons, gulab jamun (cakey syrup-soaked milk-solid balls) and kidiyo, (delicious deep fried dough balls coated in icing sugar). Indian favourites like lamb biryani, mutton curry, aloo gobi and jeera pulao make up the main meal.

Elsewhere in Asia, South Korea keeps things simple with an annual potluck-style meal shared with loved ones. Popular yuletide dishes include beef bulgogi, sweet potato noodles and Korea's most famous side dish, kimchi. In Japan, those that celebrate like to mark the occasion with a bucket from KFC. Yes, the popular American fried chicken chain. The tradition began back in 1974 when KFC rolled out its 'Kentucky for Christmas' advertising campaign, and has been a festive country-wide sensation ever since.

In the Philippines, the main Christmas spread varies from household to household, but many enjoy things like lechon, a whole skewered pig roasted until crispy over a fire, and Filipino sweet spaghetti served with sweetened tomato sauce. Across the ocean, Vietnamese Christians often attend Midnight Mass before heading home to enjoy a festive late-night feast of traditional chicken soup, roast duck or goose, sticky rice, banh xeo (savoury fried rice pancakes) and cha siu bao (steamed barbecue pork buns). Many also serve bûche de Noël as a nod to Vietnam's French colonial past.

Venturing over to the Americas brings a whole new bounty of festive goodies. Colombians celebrate with batches of traditional buñuelos, deep fried balls of queso fresco (fresh white cheese) and cornflour. Buñuelos are enjoyed before Christmas Day on 7 December, when friends get together to light candles in front of their houses and honour the Virgin Mary. While people in Chile consume a meal akin to the classic Western Christmas dinner, they're also all about the drink. Chilean wine is a mainstay of the Christmas spread of meat, potatoes and roasted vegetables, while the country's traditional holiday drink, cola de mono, or 'tail of the monkey', has also become a favourite. Everyone has their preferred recipe, but most include base ingredients of aguardiente, coffee, milk and sugar. Meanwhile, the United States' festive meal is very similar to that eaten for Thanksgiving, leaning on Western classics like turkey, potatoes and stuffing. However, a few original items also come into the mix, like boozy eggnog, made from milk, cream, sugar, egg yolks and whipped egg whites, and different types of pie, from apple and pumpkin to mincemeat and pecan.

> Traditionally Advent would have been a season of fasting, with a big Christmas meal at the end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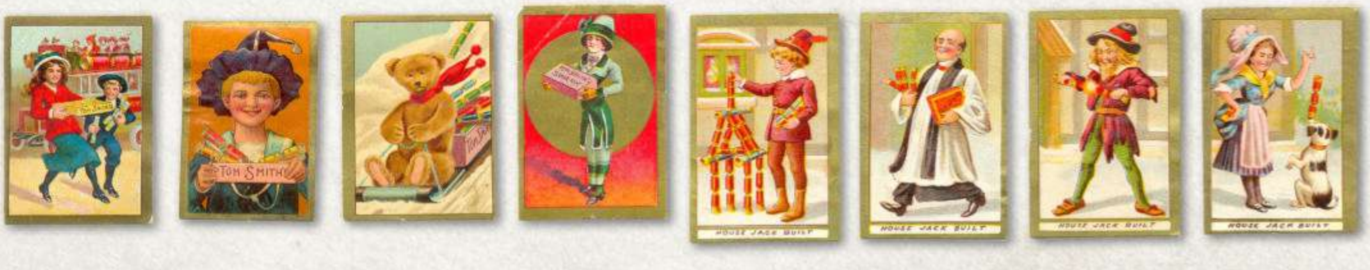
The Tom Smith annual catalogue of its products was beautifully illustrated and serves as a valuable historical resource on the fashions of its time

A surviving box of Tom Smith crackers, showing the craft that went into making them

The scraps used to illustrate Tom Smith crackers were quite exquisite drawings over a whole range of subjects, not all of them obviously to do with Christmas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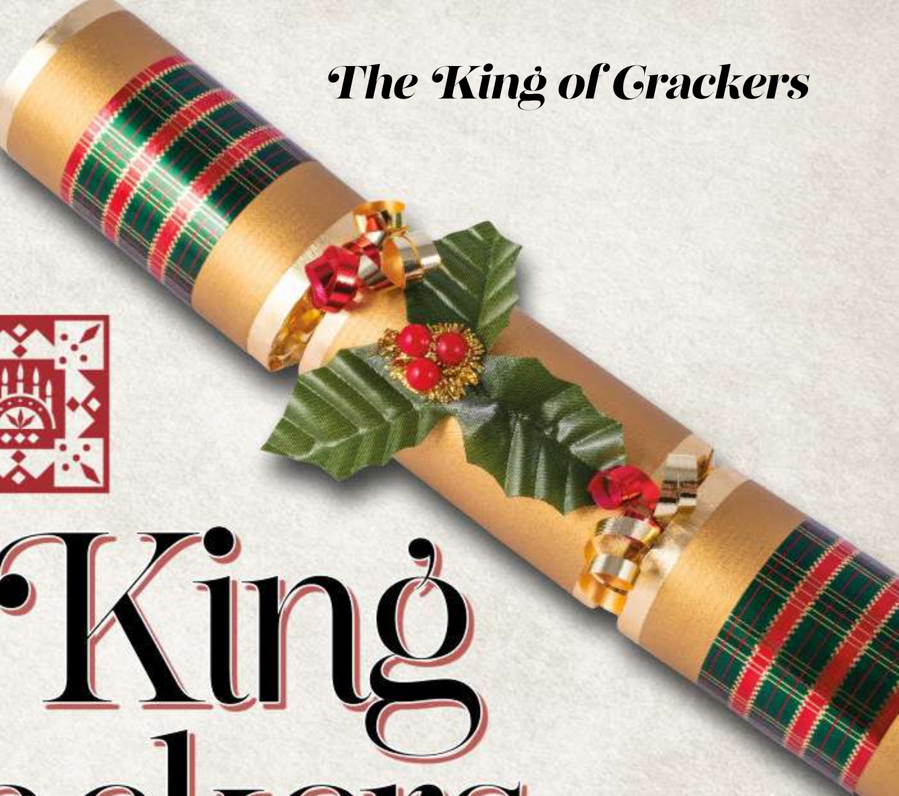


The King of Crackers

How a Victorian entrepreneur gave the world Britain's contribution to Christmas traditions

Written by Edoardo Albert

The Germans invented the Christmas tree, the modern Santa Claus is all American, but the Christmas cracker is British. Yes, a cardboard tube containing a paper hat, a landfill gift and a bad joke is the gift of these islands to the Christmas traditions of the world.

According to most sources, it was Tom Smith, Victorian entrepreneur and confectioner, who invented the cracker. Indeed, that's what his own advertising averred:

> **Tom Smith is the King of Crackers,**
> **He stands alone and needs no backers.**

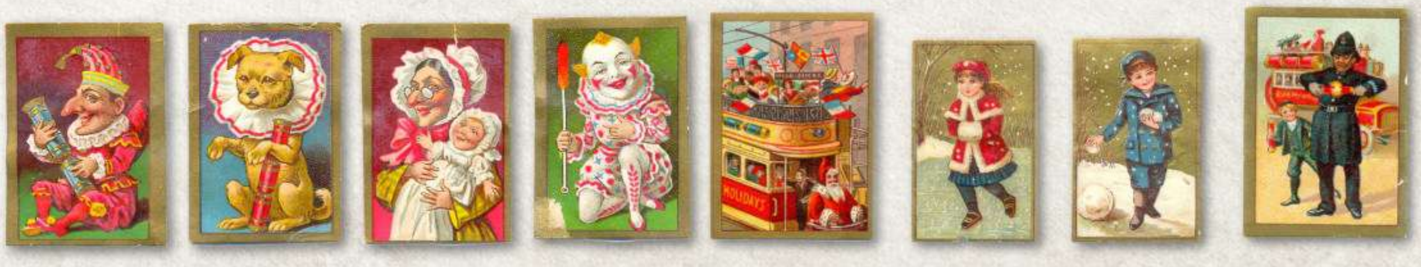
Smith set up in business in 1847 and, having discovered how the French sold sugared almonds wrapped in twists of paper, he started making and selling them himself, adding first rhymes and mottoes, and then little toys and trinkets. Looking for a fresh angle and according to Smith's account, in 1860 while ruminating by the fire he heard one of the logs crack and he decided there and then that he should put a 'crack' in his creations. Smith bought the method of making cracks from the firework company, Brocks, and marketed his new invention as 'Cosaques' since the crack was supposedly reminiscent of the cracking whips of Cossack cavalry.

However, deeper investigation shows that crackers predated Tom Smith. An 1847 drawing in the Illustrated London News shows a cracker while in 1850, journalist Henry Mayhew interviewed an unnamed Italian in the *Morning Chronicle* who ran a 'detonating cracker business'. While Mayhew does not name his interviewee, it was probably Gaudente Sparagnapane, who had started his business in 1846.

Whoever really invented the cracker, the key lay in the crack. That was first made by friction igniting saltpetre (potassium nitrate). Now silver fulminate is used.

Although Tom Smith may not have invented the cracker, it was his genius for marketing that sold it, first to Britain and then to the world. When Smith died in 1869 at the young age of 45, his three sons took over their father's cracker company, adding the paper hats that are now another integral part of the Christmas cracker experience. The company produced themed crackers, ranging from Masonic, Suffragette and Japanese crackers to the 1896 South African crackers that had as gifts tiny Gatling guns and pictures of Cecil Rhodes.

The final part of the modern cracker – the corny joke – was added in the 1930s. The custom of pulling the cracker with arms crossed had already arisen. Now all that was left was to wait for the family to gather around the table for dinner. The modern Christmas was complete.



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Many of the original participants in Junkanoo wore masks reminiscent of their African origin

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These extraordinarily intricate costumes are often made by the participants themselves, not professional costume designers!

A Caribbean Christmas: Junkanoo

Deriving from a slave festival, Junkanoo has become an integral part of the Bahamian calendar

Written by Edoardo Albert

Junkanoo is a Caribbean street festival, held on Boxing Day (26 December), New Year's Day and, latterly, during the summer too. It is celebrated throughout the English-speaking Caribbean but with a particular vibrancy, and considerable marketing, in the Bahamas. During the festival people dressed in extraordinary costumes and masks parade and dance through the streets.

The origins of the festival are obscure. Various theories have been proposed but none commands universal acceptance. One idea is that the word derives from John Canoe, an Akan warrior from Ghana who fought European slave traders in the early 18th century, establishing his base in the abandoned coastal stronghold of Fort Fredericksburg. According to Edward Long's *History of Jamaica* (1774), when Fort Fredericksburg finally fell and its defenders were enslaved, they brought the story of John Canoe with them to Jamaica where they established the festival, incorporating elements of Akan battle dress into Junkaroo (in Jamaica it is usually called Jonkonnu).

Other theories suggest links with traditional Igbo or Yoruba festivals. However, all the theories agree that Junkanoo was originally a slave festival, celebrated on 26 December and 1 January because these were among the very few days the plantation slaves in the Caribbean were allowed some rest from their labours.

Junkanoo has evolved into a major Caribbean festival, particularly in the Bahamas, where as well as Boxing Day and New Year, it has been extended into the summer tourist season. Given how much work goes into the costumes, the chance to parade in them again complements the marketing dreams of the tourism office.

The accompanying music is as much a part of the celebration as the costumes. It's a powerfully rhythmic accompaniment, utilising polyrhythms and upbeat percussion, played on goatskin drums, cowbells, whistles, horns, conch shells and sousaphones. As Junkanoo has become more international, its musical elements have broadened to include brass sections and electric and electronic instruments as well as spawning a mainstream musical style, Junka.

Junkanoo musicians and performers featured in the James Bond film *Thunderball*, although the film describes them as taking part in a Mardi Gras festival rather than Junkanoo. Although you would never guess it from watching the magnificent costumes of the participants, most of the costumes started off as plain cardboard before being cut, painted and embellished to make the extraordinary creations parading along the street.

Drums provide the driving pulse moving the festival onwards

Twelfth Night

Mayhem and merriment reigned supreme at the end of Christmas celebrations

Written by Jessica Leggett

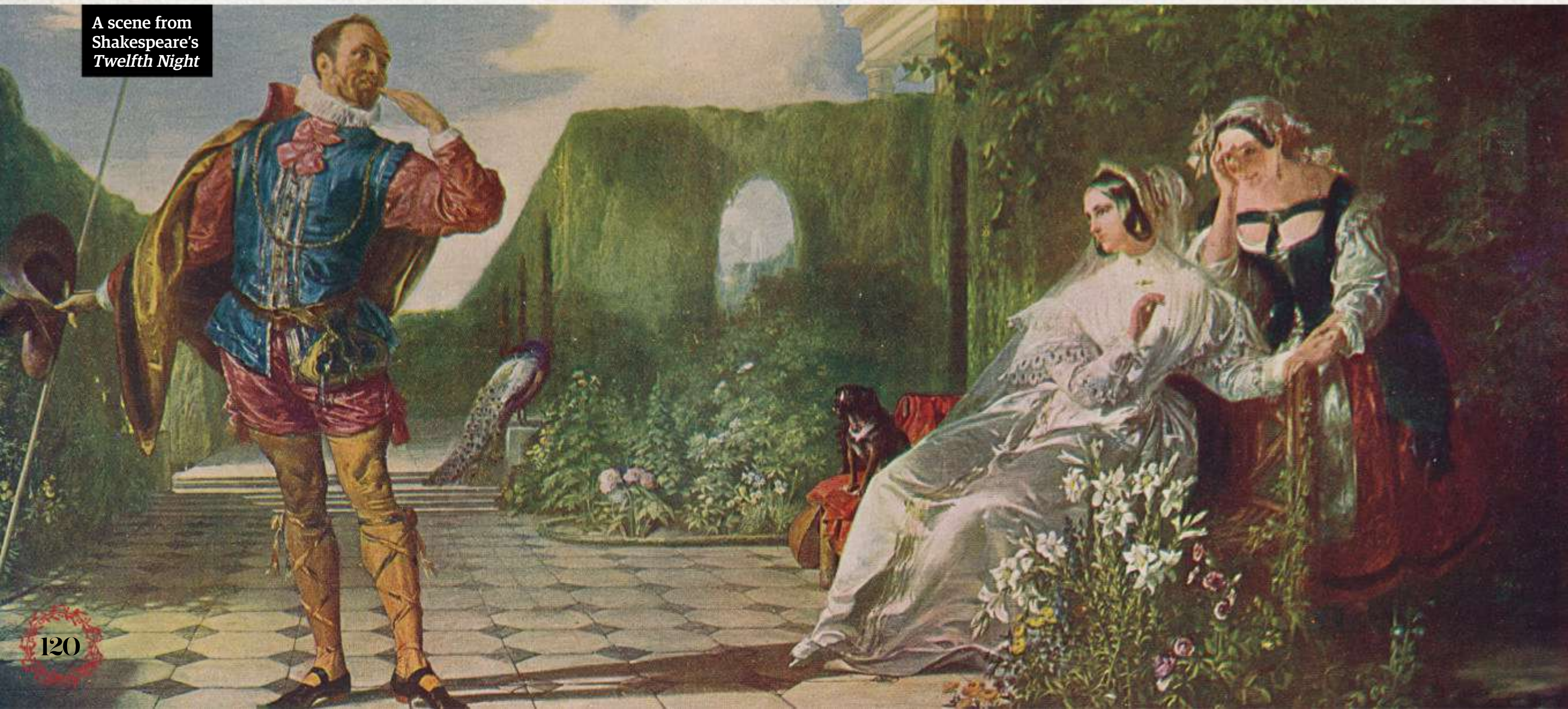
Twelfth Night, also called the Eve of Epiphany, is a celebration held on the final night of the 12 days of Christmas. It is held every year on either 5 January or 6 January, depending on whether you choose to count down from 25 or 26 December, and marks the end of the festive season.

The roots of Twelfth Night can be traced back to the pagan celebrations for the winter solstice, and to the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia, which was celebrated at the end of December. With the rise of Christianity in Europe, Twelfth Night began to commemorate the Magi, also known as the Three Kings, visiting the Baby Jesus, from the Middle Ages onwards.

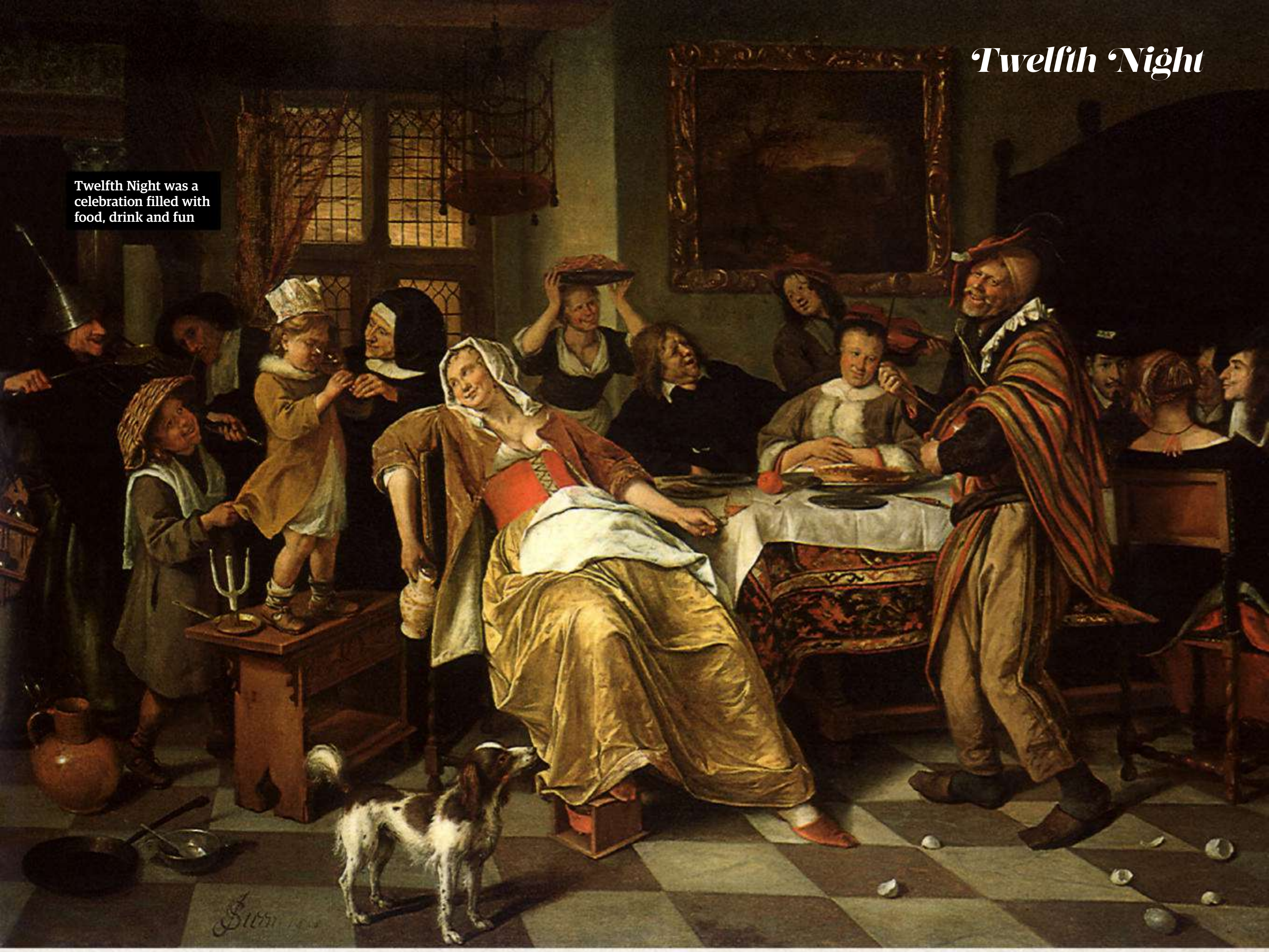
Despite being celebrated for many centuries, it was during the 16th and 17th centuries that Twelfth Night was at its most popular, becoming a bawdy celebration filled with merriment and mischief. Plays, games, food and drink became a staple part of Twelfth Night during this period, particularly in England - Shakespeare even wrote his aptly named comedic play, *Twelfth Night*, to be performed for the annual celebration. Interestingly, the world - including social hierarchies - was considered to be upside down during Twelfth Night celebrations.

When it came to the Twelfth Night feast, the Twelfth Night cake was the centrepiece of the celebration. A dried bean was hidden within the cake and the man who found the bean in his slice, regardless of his social class, would be appointed the Lord or King of Misrule for the night to lead the celebrations, as well as hold temporary power over all who were present. Likewise, a dried pea was also hidden within the cake, and the woman who found this would be appointed Queen of Misrule. Although this custom was an important part of Tudor celebrations, its popularity peaked during the Georgian era, after which it began to decline.

Even though the celebration of Twelfth Night has decreased since the 19th century, it has not disappeared. It is still celebrated in many areas in England, with traditions such as wassailing - blessing the orchard trees for the year ahead -still being performed, and it is also customary to take down the Christmas decorations on Twelfth Night. Many Christians also choose to bless their homes by Chalking the Door, a tradition that involves writing the letters 'CMB' and the year on their doorway. It is said that the letters are either a reference to the traditional names for the Three Kings, Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar, or 'Christus Mansionem Benedicat', which means 'May Christ bless this house'.

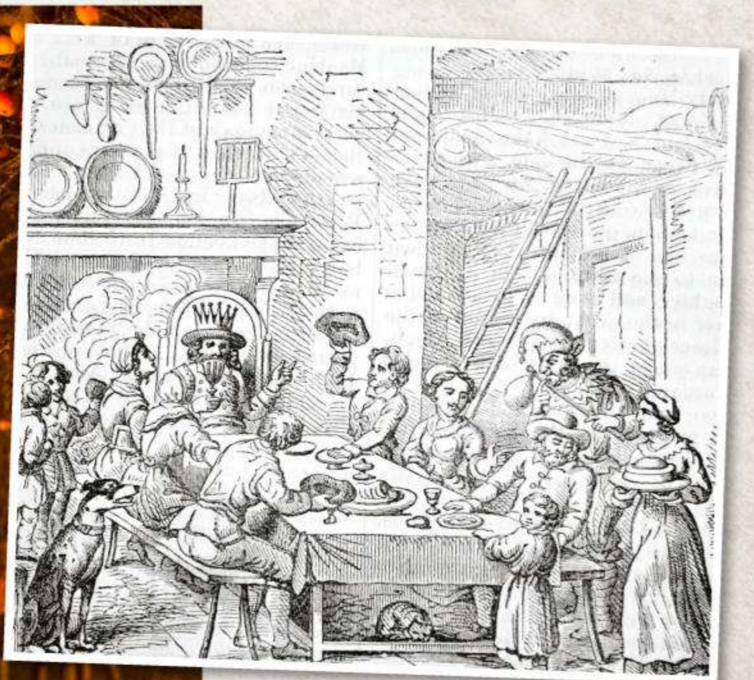


A scene from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*



Twelfth Night was a celebration filled with food, drink and fun

A Twelfth Night wassailing ceremony in the village of Orleton in 2016



This 19th century illustration depicts the King of Misrule at the head of the table

Christmas in Ethiopia

Tired of Christmas commercialisation?
Celebrate Genna, the Ethiopian Christmas

Written by Edoardo Albert

Clergy and pilgrims gather outside the church of Bet Maryam in Lalibela for Genna

Genna, also transliterated as Gena and Ganna, is the Ethiopian celebration of Christmas. Ethiopia vies with Armenia for the title of the oldest Christian country in the world: both were officially Christian in the 4th century. European scholars cast doubt on this claim but recent excavations, which have uncovered a basilica dating from the 4th century, have confirmed the Ethiopian account of their origins.

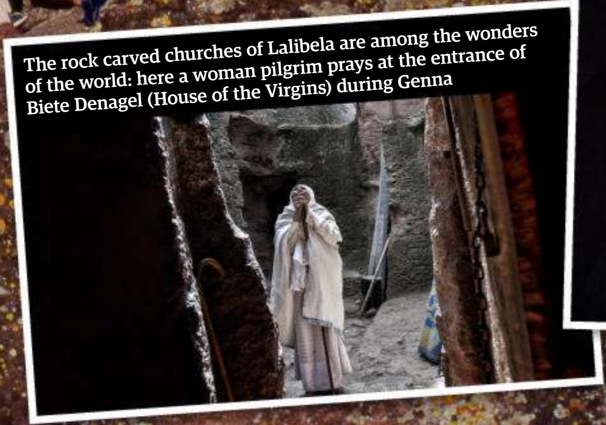
Cut off from the rest of the Christian world by the rise of Islam, Christianity in Ethiopia has a very distinct character. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church employs a calendar derived from the Coptic church in Egypt, consisting of 12 months each of 30 days and an extra five days, the Pagumen, added at the end of the year (six in the case of a leap year). The Ethiopian Orthodox Church celebrates Christmas, Genna, on 7 January. Unlike its worldwide counterparts, the feast is a strictly religious festival with no tradition of gift giving, although food plays a large part. It's no surprise that food is important, since many Ethiopian Christians fast for 43 days before Genna, eating only one meal a day during the fast and abstaining from meat, dairy, eggs and wine.

On their equivalent of Christmas Eve, Ethiopians go to church at about 6pm and the services continue until the early hours of Christmas morning. The congregation carries candles and processes around the church three times, holding their candles, while the clergy conduct the liturgy, with chants and solemn drums, from the centre of the church.

On the morning of Christmas Day, Ethiopians don all white clothing. The traditional garment is a thin, gauze cotton shawl, called netela for women and kuta for men. City dwelling Ethiopians might now wear Western clothing, but that will also be white. Having endured the 43-day fast of the prophets, Ethiopian Christians break their fast on Christmas morning with a light meal, but later in the day the family gathers to eat the traditional doro wat, a spicy chicken and vegetable stew mopped up with injera, the Ethiopian flatbread made from teff flour..

According to Ethiopian tradition, the shepherds who attended the birth of Jesus played a game similar to hockey using their shepherds' crooks. Another legend says that the Three Kings invented the game. To commemorate this, boys and young men play Yegena Chewata, abbreviated to Genna, on Christmas Day, wielding wooden sticks and playing with a leather puck.

A pilgrim praying by candlelight at the Biete Medhane Alem (House of the Saviour) in Lalibela



The rock carved churches of Lalibela are among the wonders of the world: here a woman pilgrim prays at the entrance of Biete Denagel (House of the Virgins) during Genna

Strangest Ways to Celebrate Christmas

Most people have a clear idea of what a traditional Christmas looks like – but some Christmas traditions can look very weird from the outside

Written by Ben Gazur

Christmas can seem like an unchanging and eternal fixture in the year. The Christmases of your childhood will be the benchmark against which all others are judged. It can seem like everyone partakes in exactly the same day year after year. But even considering our neighbours reveals how variable Christmas traditions are. Do you open gifts first thing, or after breakfast, or worst of all, after dinner? Do you spend all day in pyjamas or go for a bracing walk? Those minor differences are as nothing compared to the wild Christmas rituals in some places.

When most people think of a mysterious and bearded stranger visiting children for Christmas they are picturing a jolly Father Christmas. In parts of central Europe, however, many children live in fear of the appearance of Krampus. On 6 December each year St Nicholas does indeed travel around and hand out gifts but he is accompanied by Krampus, his horned helper. While good children will get treats from the saint, Krampus will beat the disobedient.

Just the appearance of Krampus should be enough to keep children well behaved. He has the pointed horns of Satan, is covered in thick hair, and a ravening tongue lolls from his mouth. He sometimes wears a basket on his back into which he will stuff naughty children to carry them off to hell. Those wishing to see a Krampus for themselves can visit any of the parades that happen on Krampusnacht. There they will see men, often drunken, dressed in horrifying costumes running through the streets armed with birch rods with which to strike unwary children. Those wishing to mollify a Krampus should keep some schnapps handy.

In Iceland young people are taught to fear the appearance of the evil giantess Grýla. She hungers for human flesh and is always ready to carry off wicked children. Grýla owns a cat called Jólakötturinn who will eat anyone who does not receive new clothes on Christmas Day, which perhaps explains why clothing is a traditional holiday gift. The giantess' family is completed by her 13 sons known as the Yule Lads. These mischievous boys visit homes starting on 12 December, with a new one arriving each day. They love to play pranks and eat food, but will also sometimes leave small gifts in shoes that have been placed on windowsills by

Not all Christmas visitors are welcome, as the traditional Krampus runs of Germany show

Cabbage Patch Riots

Christmas is a time of peace and gift giving – or at least it is supposed to be. Sometimes though the demand for gifts makes it a less than peaceful season for desperate parents. In 1983 in the United States there was only one toy that every child was clamouring for and people would stop at nothing to get their hands on one.

Cabbage Patch Dolls are instantly recognisable with their soft round faces and little cloth outfits. Each came with a birth certificate and each was unique. America fell in love with them, and they were on every list sent to Santa Claus. Unfortunately it was left to parents to actually shop for them. Such was the demand that thousands would turn up to buy when only hundreds of dolls were available. In news footage of the time, shop owners can be seen wielding baseball bats in an effort to keep shoppers in line. Despite ticketing systems and early queuing, some toy shops saw violence in the aisles.

The riots surrounding Cabbage Patch Dolls have been repeated almost every Christmas since as children all demand some popular toy, whether it is a Furby or a Tickle Me Elmo.

Desperate shoppers waited for hours for stores to open and fought to grab one of the sought after dolls

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good children. Bad children get a rotten potato in their shoe.

People who love books may want to visit Iceland on Christmas Eve. There is a tradition of giving books to each other, putting on pyjamas, getting cosy with a hot chocolate and reading late into the night. This tradition is known as Jólabókaflóðið – the Christmas Book Flood.

Decorating the house is a key part of Christmas in many countries. Not all decorations will be familiar to some however. In Ukraine there is a tradition of decorating the tree with cobwebs and a spiders. This might seem more suited to Halloween but there is a folk tale that explains why the Christmas spider is a welcome guest.

A poor family once brought a pine cone into their home and decided to plant it. By Christmas it had grown into the finest Christmas tree they had ever seen. The mother was ashamed, however, as she would not be able to afford decorations for it. At night a spider came in and began to spin its webs along the branches. In the morning the whole tree was covered. Instead of sweeping them away and getting rid of the spider the family left it in peace. As the Sun rose the first rays transformed the web into strands of silver and gold to the family's joy. Today people hang tinsel in memory of the generous spider and put a spider ornament on the tree.

Not all Christmas decorations have an easily explained origin. In the United States you may notice a pickle nestling among the branches of the Christmas tree. The pickle is usually made of glass and no one is quite certain why it was invented. One story links it to a tale of children who had been slaughtered by a cannibalistic butcher who stored their bodies in a pickle barrel. St Nicholas resurrected them and they hung the ornaments in memory of their rescue. Though the tradition is said to actually be German in origin, in practice it remains little known outside of the United States.

> 'Many strange Christmas traditions are associated with invoking luck for the coming year

British people may wax lyrical about the scent of chestnuts roasting on an open fire but in Guatamala the aroma of Christmas is the burning corpse of Satan. 7 December is known as La Quema del Diablo – The Burning of the Devil. At 6pm families will gather around a bonfire and toss an effigy of the devil into the flames. By burning an image of evil the family home is purified for the coming Christmas season.

Not every effigy built at Christmas is designed to be burned; even if it often is. The Yule Goat is a common image in Scandinavia. Small images of the goat, made of straw, are hung from Christmas trees. It may be that the goat represents an old pagan deity involved in providing plenty. In the 18th century a member of a household would dress as a goat and bring presents into the home. Today the most famous, and famously flammable, Yule Goat is found in Gävle, Sweden.

Each year at the beginning of Advent the local community comes together to built a huge Yule

Colonel Sanders dressed as Father Christmas welcomes Japanese diners for a traditional festive meal

12月24日（木）
12月25日（金）
14：00～

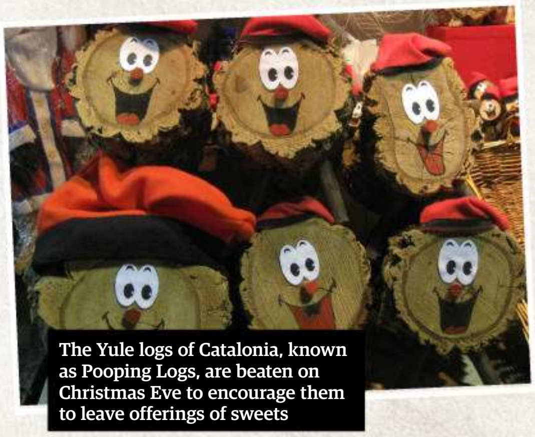
The Icelandic giantess Grylla, shown with her husband, has a taste for children's flesh

Goat that stands around 14m tall. It is made of wood and straw and has become the target of arsonists. Of the 56 goats that have been constructed 38 have been set on fire. It has become such a tradition for the goat to be burned down that some visitors think it is supposed to happen. One American who set fire to the Yule Goat believed he was taking part in an ancient fire ritual. He was jailed for 18 days. In 2016 the goat stood for just one hour before it was set alight.

Other Christmas traditions also involve treating an ornament very badly. Christmas logs may be familiar as a cake to many but in Catalonia a log really is a log. Known as Caga Tio - literally Pooping Log - these decorations are made from a log with a painted smiling face and four legs. Over the log is draped a blanket to keep it warm. Throughout the Christmas period children are encouraged to feed the log with crusts of bread and orange peel. Then on Christmas Eve they sing a song to the log:

**“‘Log of Christmas,
poop nougats,
pee white wine,
don't poop herrings,
they are too salty,
poop nougats,
they are much better!”**

The children then beat the log with sticks. When the blanket is removed from the log little sweet treats will have been excreted by the log.



The Yule logs of Catalonia, known as Pooping Logs, are beaten on Christmas Eve to encourage them to leave offerings of sweets

Caga Tio is not the only scatological Christmas tradition from Catalonia. If you examine nativity scenes in the region you might spot a strange character in the corner squatting to relieve themselves. This is known as the Caganer - the Pooper. The tradition of having such a weird guest at the birth of Jesus dates from the 18th century and may be related to ensuring a farm's fertility. One Catalan saying goes “Dung is no saint, but where it falls it works miracles.”

Today Caganers are very popular with tourists. Versions can be bought that resemble everyone from the Pope, to Darth Vader, to any politician you care to name.

If talk of Caganers makes you want to clean up you should avoid Norway. There it is traditional to hide all the brooms in a house on Christmas Eve. This is because evil spirits are said to roam on that night and if a witch finds a broom she will take it as an excuse to ride it.

Brooms are not the only strange mode of transport some people use on Christmas Eve. In Caracas, Venezuela, you will find people spending the night on roller-skates. Known as Las Patinatas - the skating - the tradition sees families donning their skates and singing hymns and Christmas songs throughout the night. Then as the sun rises they skate away to attend Misa de Gallo, the cockerel's mass, at church which takes place around 5am.

Though most people think of Christmas traditions as ancient there are some that can be traced to an exact and modern moment. Though Christians are a small minority of the Japanese population celebrations of Christmas are popular. One way millions celebrate is to buy a bucket of KFC chicken.

The idea came to the owner of the first KFC restaurant in the country when he woke up one night in 1970 and wrote down an idea that he had in a dream - a Christmas “party barrel” of chicken. By 1974 the KFC company began marketing with the slogan “KFC for Christmas”. Now families will order their Christmas meal weeks in advance and queue for hours to get their traditional meal on Christmas Day.

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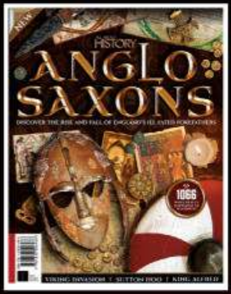
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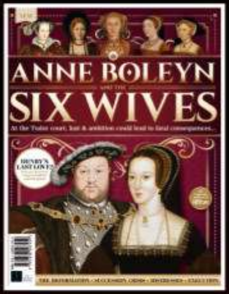
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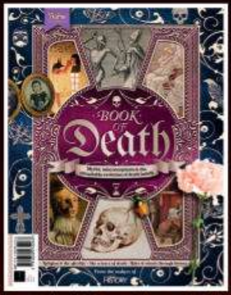
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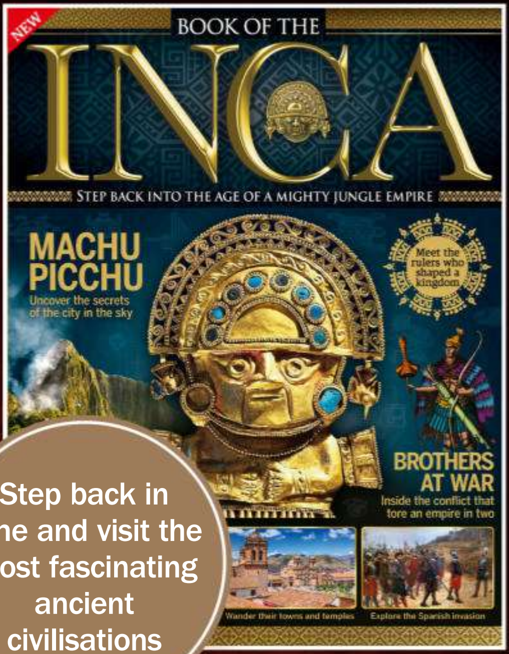
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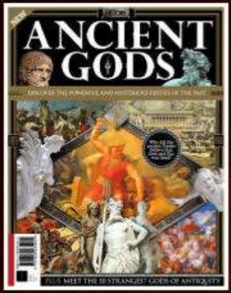
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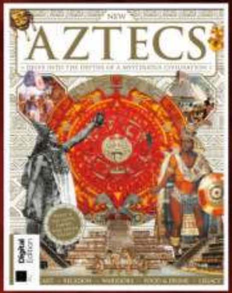

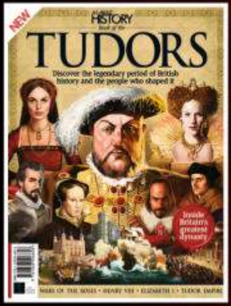

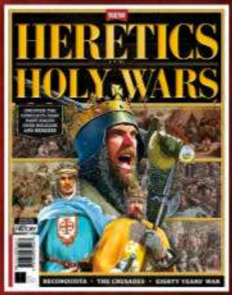
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